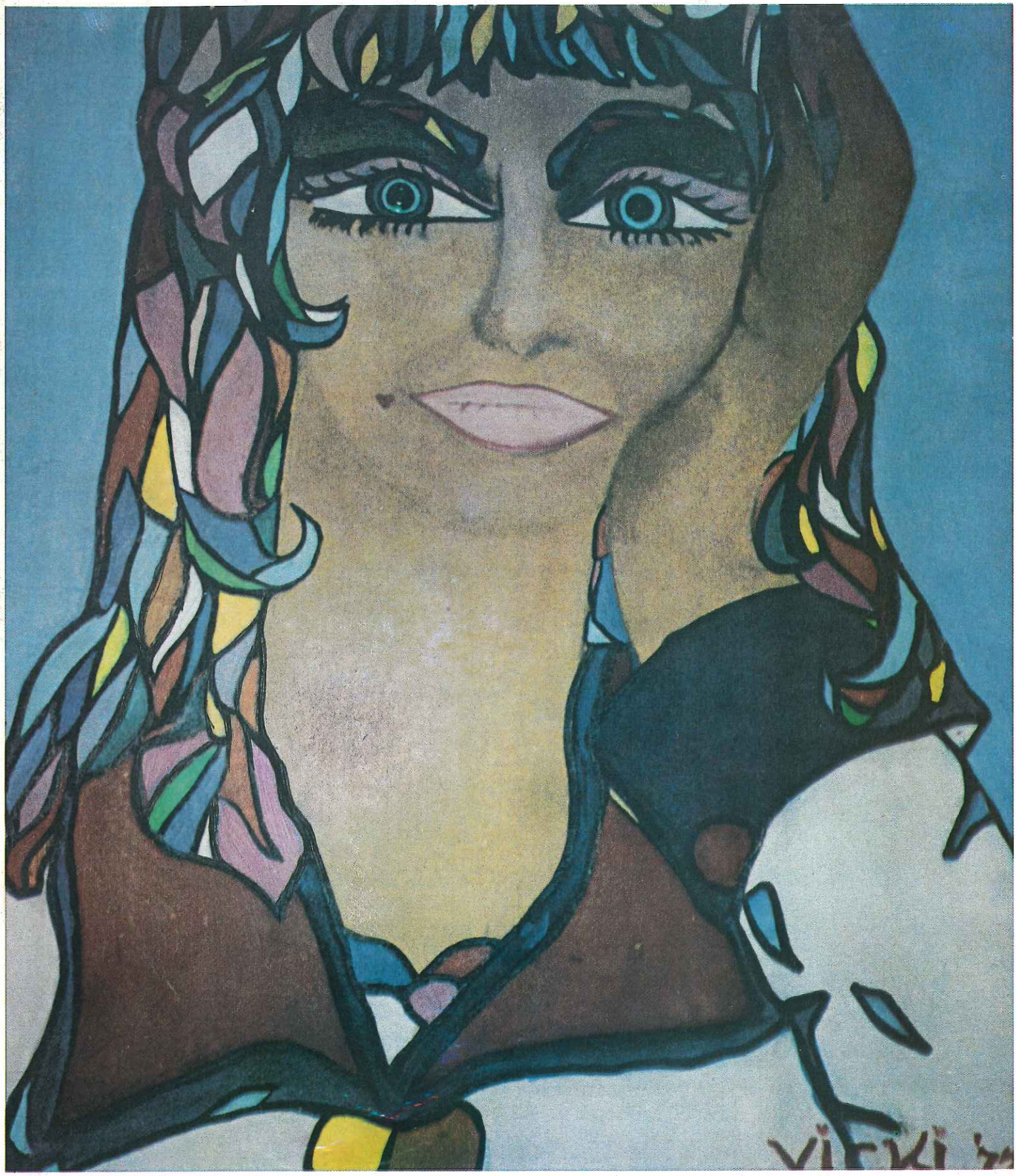
Apollo's Lute



Palm Beach Community College

APOLLO'S LUTE

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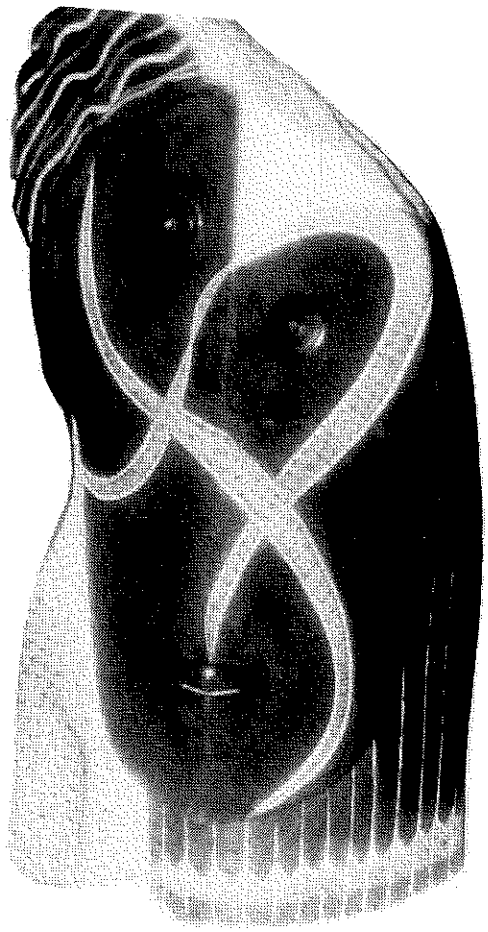
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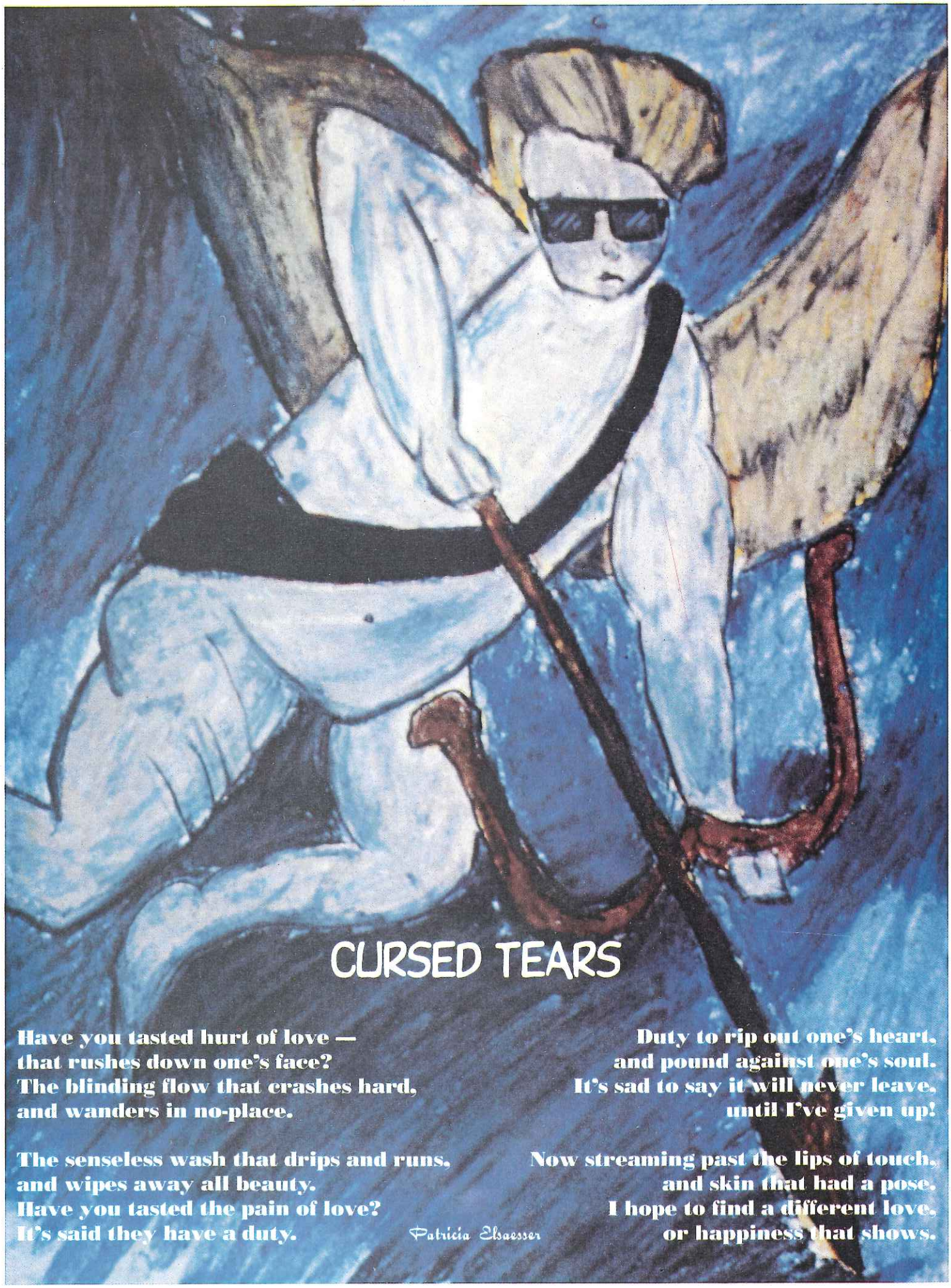
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CURSED TEARS

Have you tasted hurt of love —
that rushes down one's face?
The blinding flow that crashes hard,
and wanders in no-place.

The senseless wash that drips and runs,
and wipes away all beauty.
Have you tasted the pain of love?
It's said they have a duty.

Duty to rip out one's heart,
and pound against one's soul.
It's sad to say it will never leave,
until I've given up!

Now streaming past the lips of touch,
and skin that had a pose.
I hope to find a different love,
or happiness that shows.

Patricia Ebaesser

THE OLD CRACKER COWBOY

Kathleen Owens

Sit down a spell while I tell you a tale,
Of the old cracker cowboy, from Florida he'd hail;
It seems that cowboys weren't born in the West,
If that raises an eyebrow, let me tell you the rest.

Their horses were cow ponies brought over from Spain
In the year 1500, on Florida's flat plain;
And horses and cattle were Florida's big stock,
Way before pilgrims got off Plymouth Rock;

And if rough-bearded vagabonds mean "cowboy" to you,
An old cracker scalawag would fit like a shoe;
His hat was of straw and broad-brimmed to boot,
His rifle, his pride, though, too quick to shoot.

If danger and daring are what you'd expect,
Their range wars and rustling might gain your respect;
Now the old cracker cowboy had plenty to do,
With hangings and lynchings and dueling there, too.

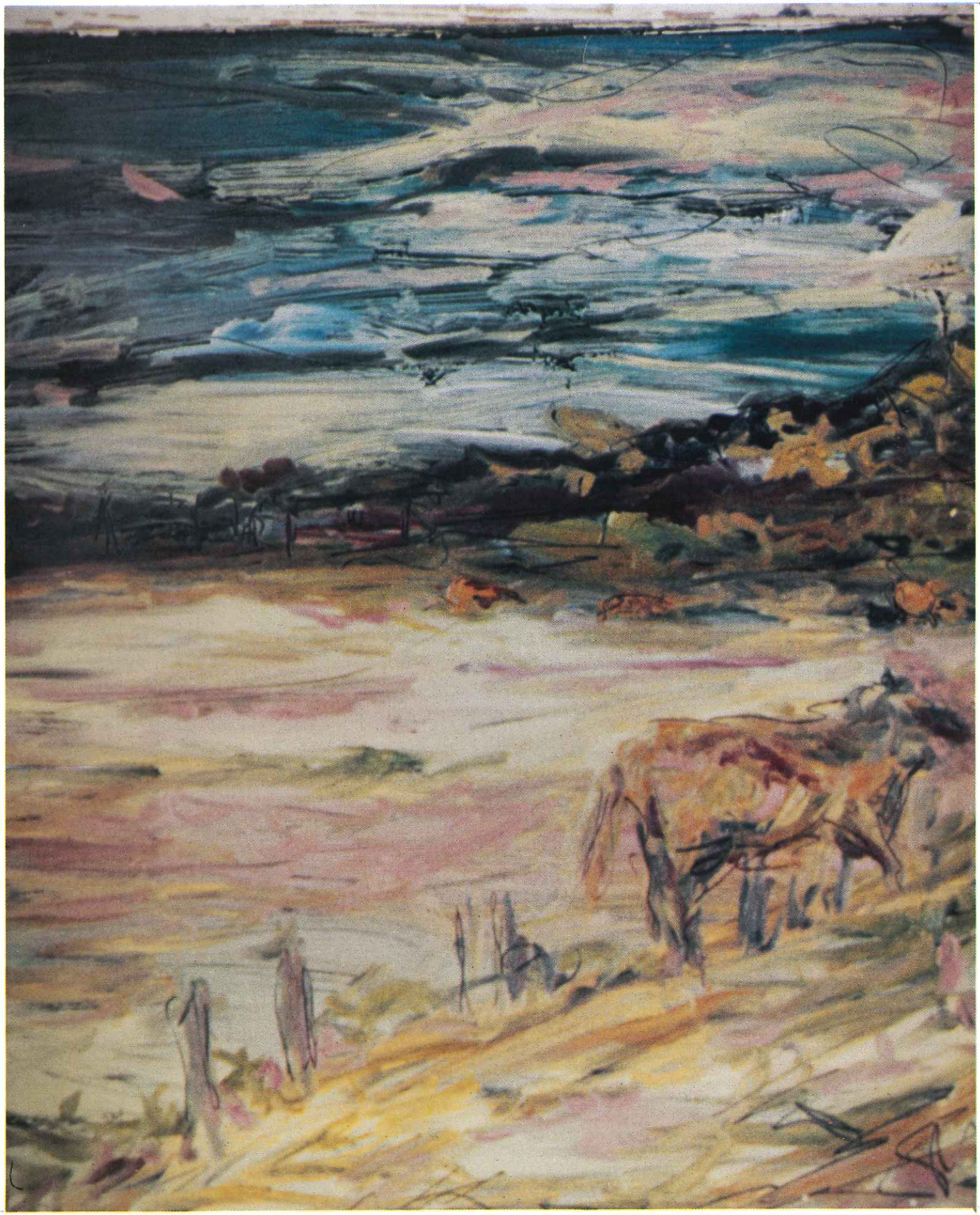
It's true that a cowboy must face impossible strife,
And so did the cracker eking out a cowboy's life;
Through quicksand and palmetto scrub and oppressive heat,
He drove his herd onward and would never be beat.

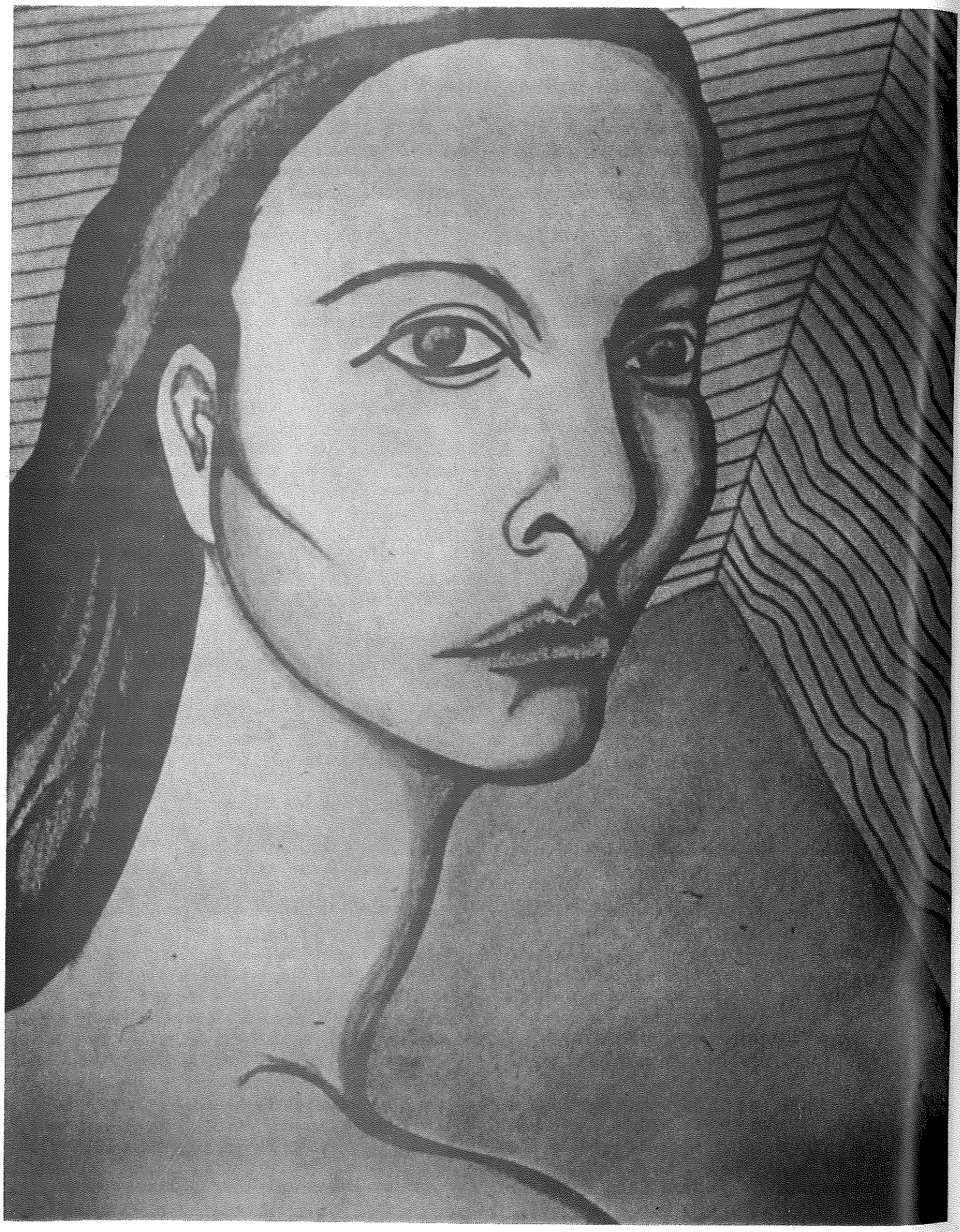
And Florida was ideal for ranchin', you see
With its prairies and rivers abundant and free;
From sunup till sundown he'd work all day
Meeting panthers and bears and wolves on the way.

He'd drive his wild livestock around the Big Lake,
To Punta Rassa for the gold he could make;
Where hoofs and hats and hot tempers soared,
When whiskey and wagers and wild stories poured.

A cowboy's the kind who will stand by his word,
Who forges ahead in spite of the herd;

So next time you think of those cowboys out West,
Remember the cracker paved the way for the rest.





The Noble Grandeur of Her Smile

The noble grandeur of her smile
How delectable, how mystical

The way it makes the wisps of wind
Blow the last leaves down from the treetops
Coaxing a final Autumn-colored rain
That remind me of the snow
A snow that sadly stops falling
after covering the world with a quiet blanket
To protect the ground from an icy wind
Or a rain that ceases
Just as it was lulling me to sleep
Making me want more
More of it
A constant shower of her smile
Filled with a yearning for the frightful power wielded
A fascination with her strength
Her emotion

The crest of a wave that erupts with a terrifying majesty
Whether it crashed forth
Or sweeps by me with secret stealth
The shimmering glistening tear that shines like a pearl
in the corner of her eyes
when she radiates a joy that she keeps secret
From me

And by speaking of it
It would evaporate
or diminish
And then she would resent me,
Maybe
So I can not find out
Nor desire to try to guess
at the unknown cause of her joy
Because I might rightly, and that would ruin it
It is in not knowing what prompts her smile
That holds me hostage to its brilliance
That holds me hostage to the giving of it
The giving that crushes me,
as if I had never seen a smile before
and live in fear I might not see it again
The miraculous wonder, I am transfixed
by her smile.

Stephen Shasha



Dungeon Johnny

The dark of the night,
The cold, damp, room,
The big, bald Johnny,
Stands, staring at doom.

His eyes are cold,
Gray as the fog,
This condemned man,
This wretched dog,

He used to guard victims,
He was an ugly brute,
Now this pale, cold Johnny,
Has his death to recruit.

He stands in a cell,
Chained at his feet,
This once big Johnny,
Has nothing to eat.

No food of life,
No food of pleasure,
No food of freedom,
Or of any measure.

Dungeon Johnny,
He stands alone,
He is dying empty,
and his soul will groan.

What crime is so great,
What deed is so black,
To send this roach Johnny,
Into this murky shack?

He stole some fruit,
He swore a little,
He murdered a man,
Cut 'em down the middle.

Now Dungeon Johnny,
Is paying the price,
His sins have been counted,
There's no roll of the dice.

His time is coming
His luck has run dry,
This once brutish Johnny,
Is going to die.

But a stream of light,
As white as a dove,
And as bright as the sun,
Shoots in from above.

It pierces the bricks,
It pierces the bars,
It pierces the mildew,
And shines like the stars.

A bright, white figure,
Majestic and calm,
Stands before him,
With holes in his palms.

His eyes are like fire,
And his hair is like snow,
And the sword in his mouth,
Has a majestic glow.

Dungeon Johnny,
As stunned as can be,
Looks at the figure,
Too bright to see.

He shades his eyes,
His eyes pushed aside,
The figure explains,
That He is the guide.

The figure tells Johnny,
That there is no living,
If a sinful man,
Does not ask for forgiving.

This once big Johnny,
Now pale with starvation,
Opens his mouth,
And prays for salvation.

He knows of his faults,
He knows of his lies,
He knows of his sins,
And wants them to fly.

Fly far away,
Into the flash wind,
And into a crevasse,
Beyond the sea's end.

He prays for the burden,
To lift from his soul,
And to be cast away,
Into a deep hole.

Dungeon Johnny,
With peace in his heart,
Watches the sword,
Come down like a dart.

It pierces the chains,
Shattering like glass,
Releasing a pain,
That was thought never to pass.

The majestic figure,
As bright as can be,
Shouts, "Glory to God,
You have been set free!"

Dungeon Johnny,
Appealed of his crimes,
Can leave this prison,
This hell of grime.

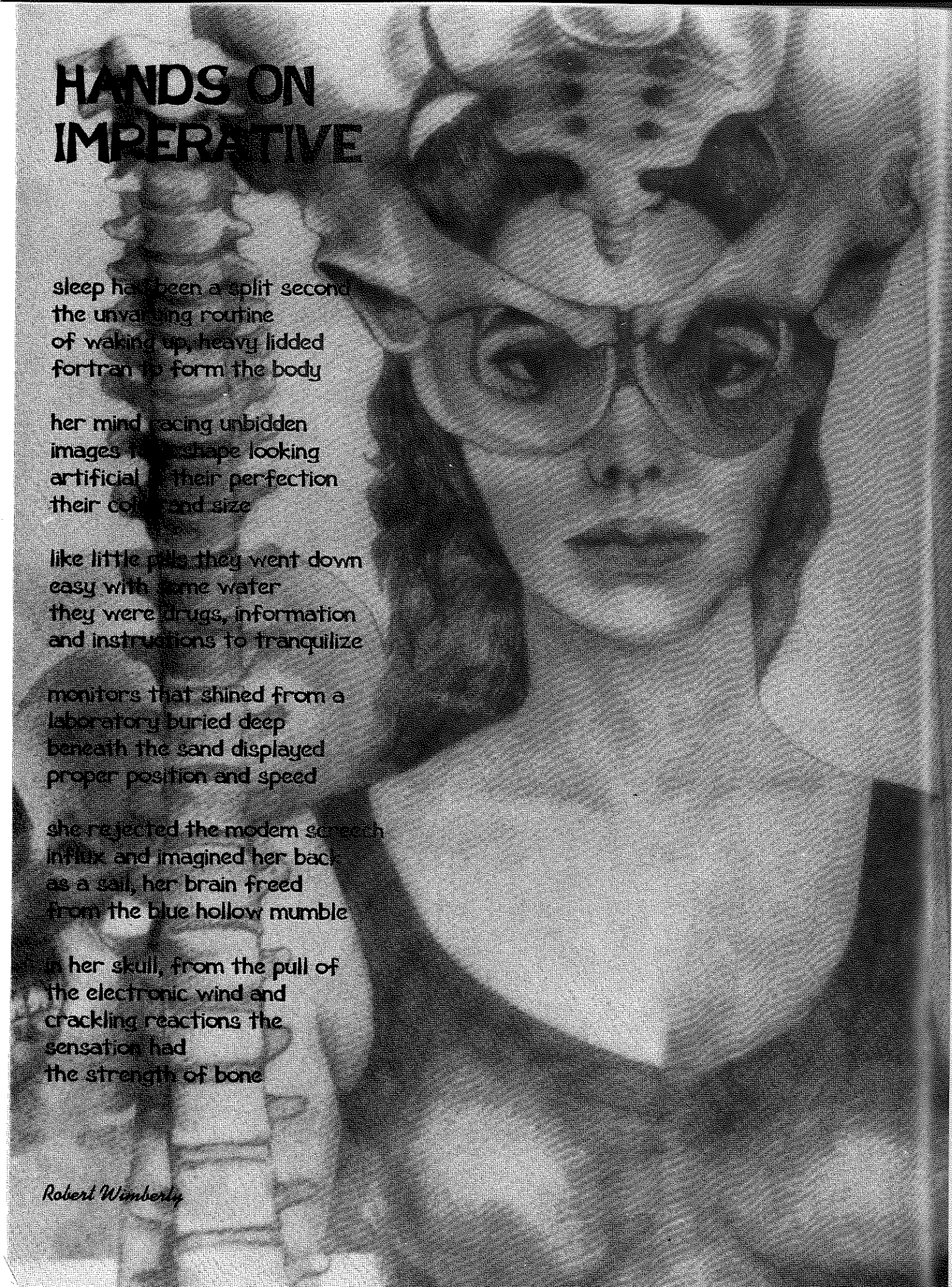
Set free is Johnny,
Set free is soul,
Set free of his pain,
And set free of this hole.

The majestic figure,
Leads Johnny away,
Into the light, that
Will never go gray.

Dungeon Johnny,
As free as the sky,
Will never again,
Be sentenced to die.

———— Jeremy Bursey

HANDS ON IMPERATIVE



sleep had been a split second
the unvarying routine
of waking up, heavy lidded
fortran to form the body

her mind racing unbidden
images [illegible]shape looking
artificial in their perfection
their color and size

like little pills they went down
easy with some water
they were drugs, information
and instructions to tranquilize

monitors that shined from a
laboratory buried deep
beneath the sand displayed
proper position and speed

she rejected the modem screech
influx and imagined her back
as a sail, her brain freed
from the blue hollow mumble

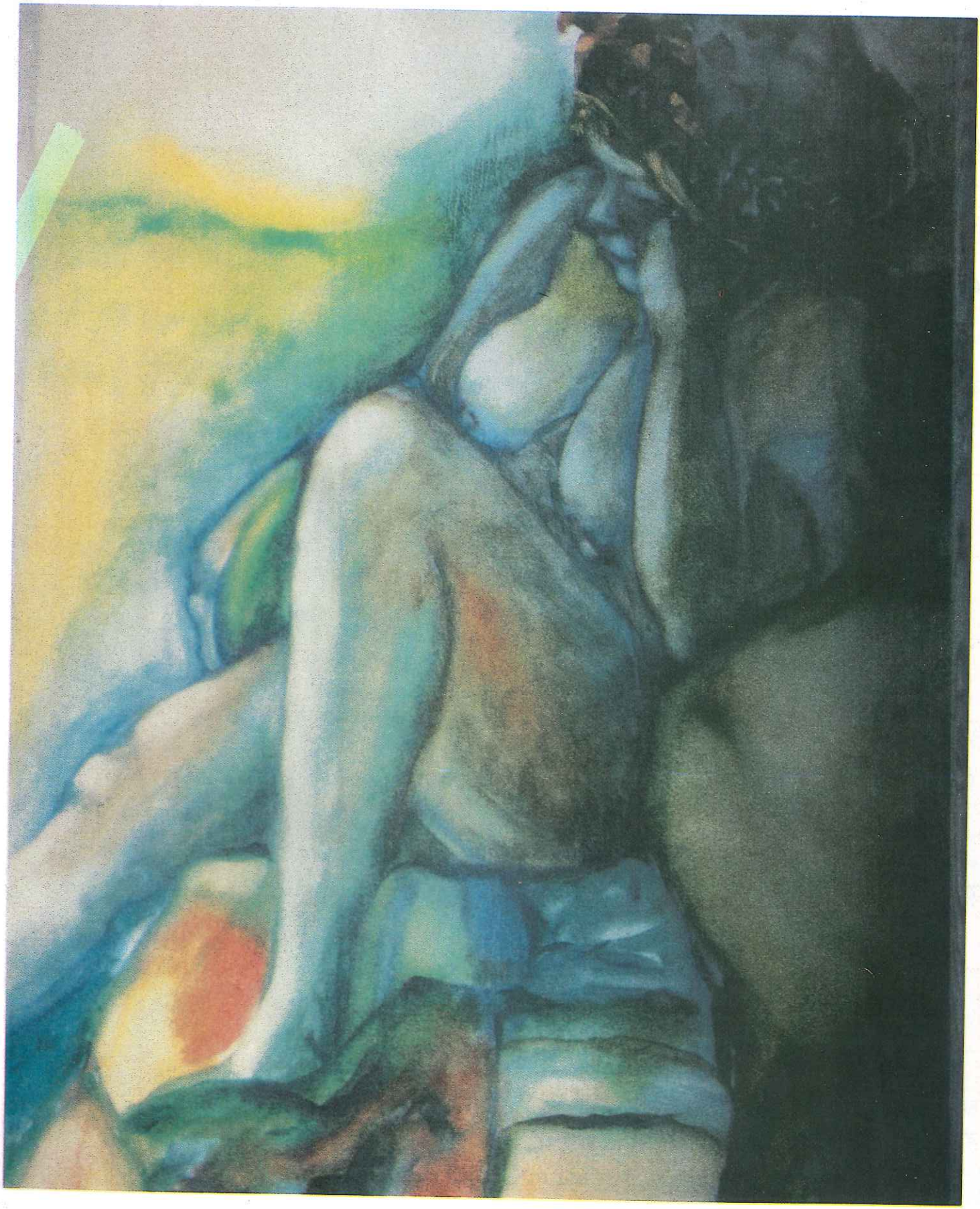
in her skull, from the pull of
the electronic wind and
crackling reactions the
sensation had
the strength of bone

Robert Wimberly

UNIVERSAL JELL-O

about the universe, ya see, i have this theory.
i thought about it so much, it made me weary.
a theory that says the universe is a giant jell-o mold.
all wiggly and jiggly, and it's really quite cold.
it's really interesting, all thought
out and planned,
but in the public school
system, it was banned.
my theory is plain and
simple, as you will see.
i mean, c'mon, what else
do you expect of me?
if you steal this from me,
watch out, i'll sue!
and now, here it is,
without further adieu:
the universe is a Big BLOB
of jell-o.
i'm telling you this so that you
will know
that the galaxies are the many
pieces of fruit.
strawberries, raspberries, apples,
and maybe some kiwi to boot!
the solar system, in turn, is a tiny little seed.
it ain't over yet, please continue to read!
i guess that would make earth a tiny little atom.
no! not that guy with eve! listen a little closer, madam,
and you'll understand the significance of life.
and, sir, i think it could, quite possibly, be your wife.
hey, that's the way i feel, if you don't like it, sue me!
unless, you suppose, the universe could be some lopsided little pea?

Shane Dunn



Natural Beauty

Once long ago I had streams of long hair
that covered me
each strand a different length

My strong deep brown roots
had fiery golden tips toward winter and
lighter pastels for spring
Occasionally I used flowers or fruits to
draw more attention to my thick, lush locks

Water clean and blue to rinse and
warm golden sunlight to dry

I had thought myself inviting and carefree

until
one day
They admitted their distaste
and quickly set about
rearranging my strands so
they'd all look the same

My brilliant fountains of light blues became
thick and brown

While my highlights of
red, orange, and gold
were cut at the roots
and now would never grow

Every part of me has somehow been
sheared

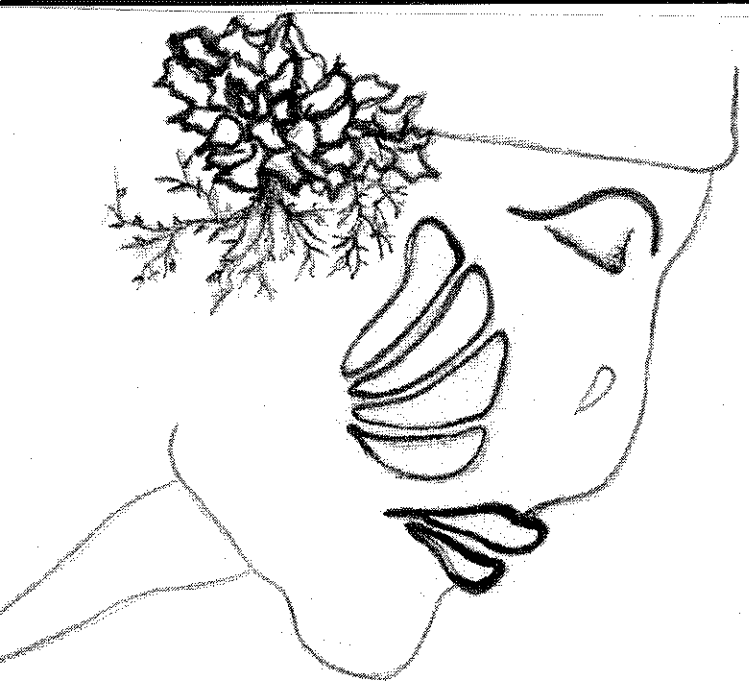
Suddenly
They now
start to scream their fears

My bald spots are unattractive
The sun's smile too bright

They step back
desperately
trying to repair
my damaged locks

All the while
Crying, crying...
"Forgive us
oh Mother Earth"

Myriam Bourjolly



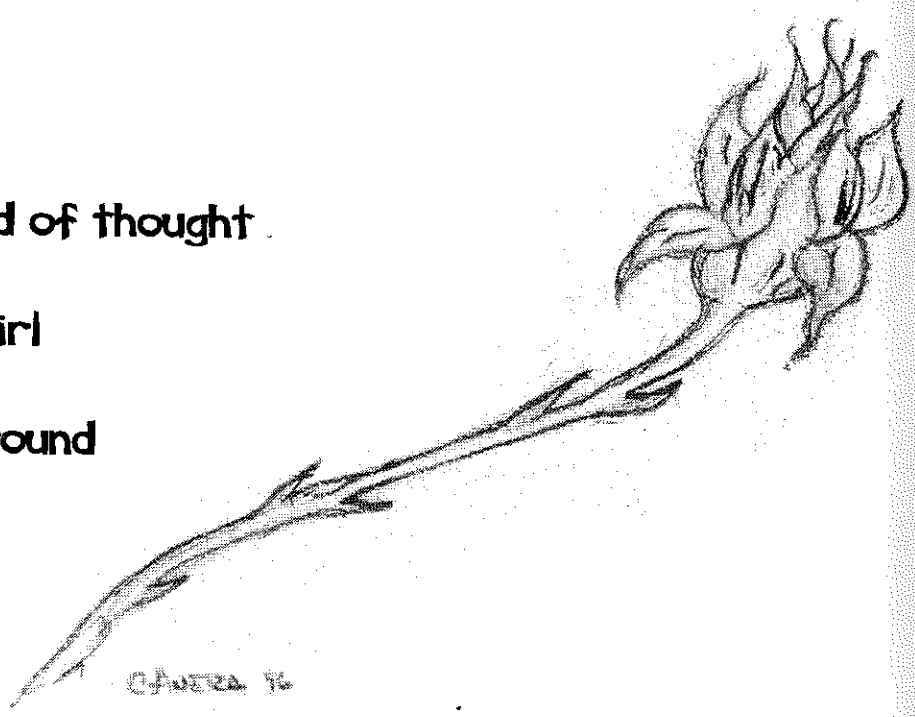
One thousand thorns
pricked my heart
and murmur down so deep
One thousand holes
they bleed my life
and share my ancestry

My blood hath held
of golden hands
Stain and blind the dark
Which wraps a blanket warm between
my life and dear depart

One Thousand Thorns

DANEA LEIGH

One thousand thorns
One thousand thorns
of mercy tear my soul
and drag my stormy hold of thought
into the dungeon soil
Bleeding wife, punctured girl
Crone of weathered land
Sacrifice your mourning wound
And prick my heart again.



This Tattered Bed

As I lie beside you in this tattered bed
Years of abuse run through my head

We once vowed to love, 'till death do us part'
A vow you took literally right from the start

Our sheets now are yellowed, shredded and torn
The broken springs protrude, stabbing like thorns

The memories of your horrible beatings still burn
From each baneful lesson you thought I should learn

Our pillows are mangled and ripped at the seams
Falling apart, just like my dreams

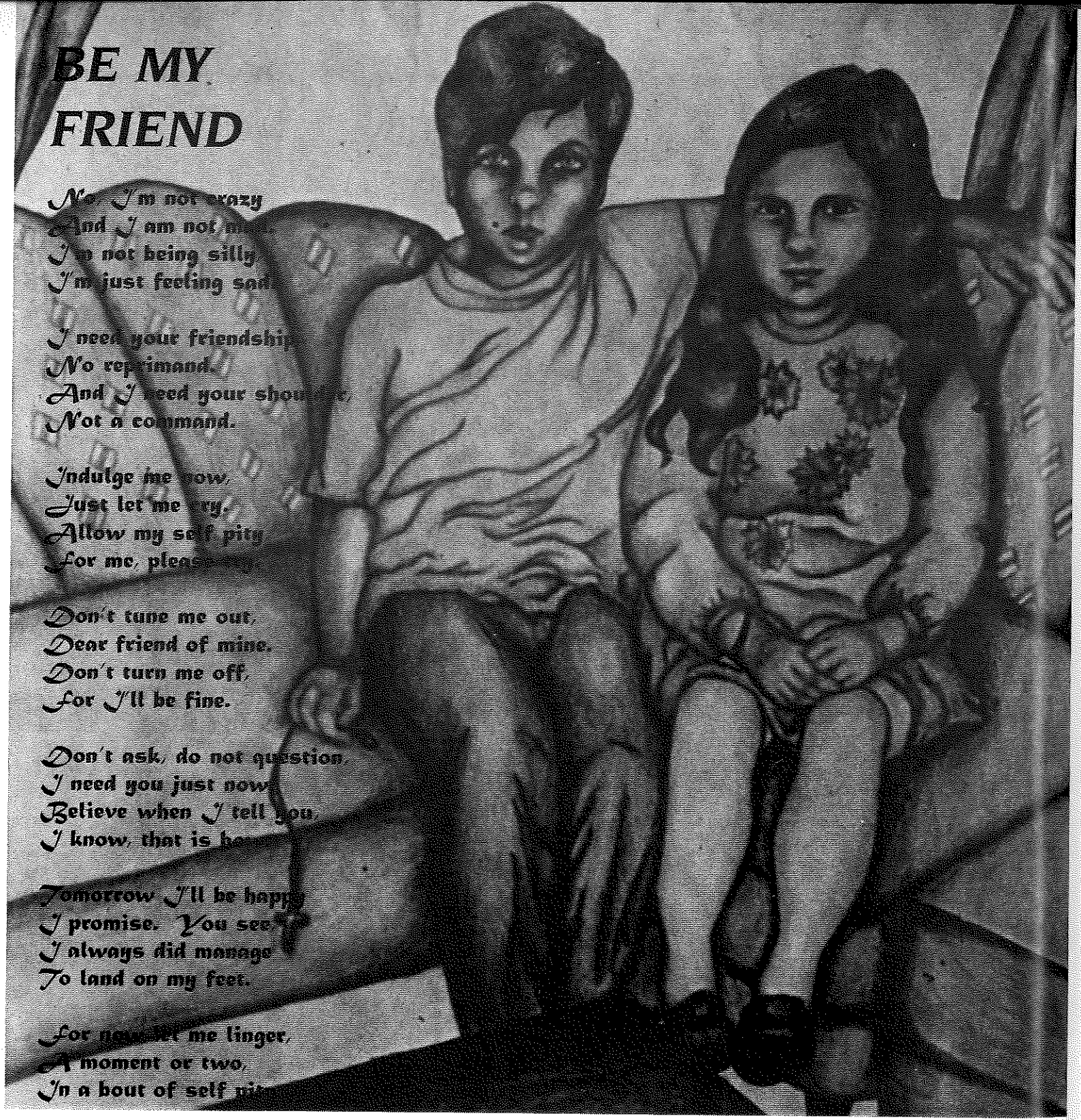
Tiny shreds of a blanket, lie silent across the floor
Too sacred, like myself, to make a break for the door

So I lie here not sleeping, plotting instead
A safe way to break my bond with you and this bed

Michelle Frazier



BE MY FRIEND



No, I'm not crazy
And I am not mad.
I'm not being silly
I'm just feeling sad.

I need your friendship,
No reprimand.
And I need your shoulder,
Not a command.

Indulge me now,
Just let me cry.
Allow my self pity
For me, please try.

Don't tune me out,
Dear friend of mine.
Don't turn me off,
For I'll be fine.

Don't ask, do not question,
I need you just now.
Believe when I tell you,
I know, that is how.

Tomorrow I'll be happy
I promise. You see,
I always did manage
To land on my feet.

For now, let me linger,
A moment or two,
In a bout of self pity

It will be over quite soon,
For the cure, my dear friend,
Is just talking to you.

Miriam Dankberg



I Have Opened My Eyes and Seen It

I have opened my eyes and seen it
for the first time.
A strange feeling has come over me.
I have always imagined it to be like this.
This weight has been lifted off my shoulders.
I can fly now. High. Into space if I want to.

Wait a minute. I can breathe.
My lungs can fill with air now.
For a minute I thought I forgot how.
It hurts to take in so much air at once.
It makes my lungs burn.

And oh my. Tears. Real true honest to God tears.
I can cry. I can really cry.
This is amazing.
Freedom.
So this is what it feels like.

Barbara Miller

Tarot or Not Tarot



Evening Star Tarot Child
Woe is me and mercy mild
Temples here, so long defiled
Like candles in a box!

A Wheel of symbols spins through space
Meaning shifts from place to place
As shining Suns reveal a face
To come and steal it later!

Spirits tangled in a mesh
A briny sea of blood in flesh
Caring more or caring less
The paths lay unprovided!

And All from None will rise to seem
Itself a dream within a Dream
Images strung upon a beam
To seem…and Fade away!

The winds of Life, both calms and gales
Etch our lives in breezy trails
And traveling at the pace of snails,
Did I hear an Angel laughing?

Around us as if birthed of Fire,
Water, Earth, Wind, Desire
The OLD ONES smile and never tire
Their folly too is endless!

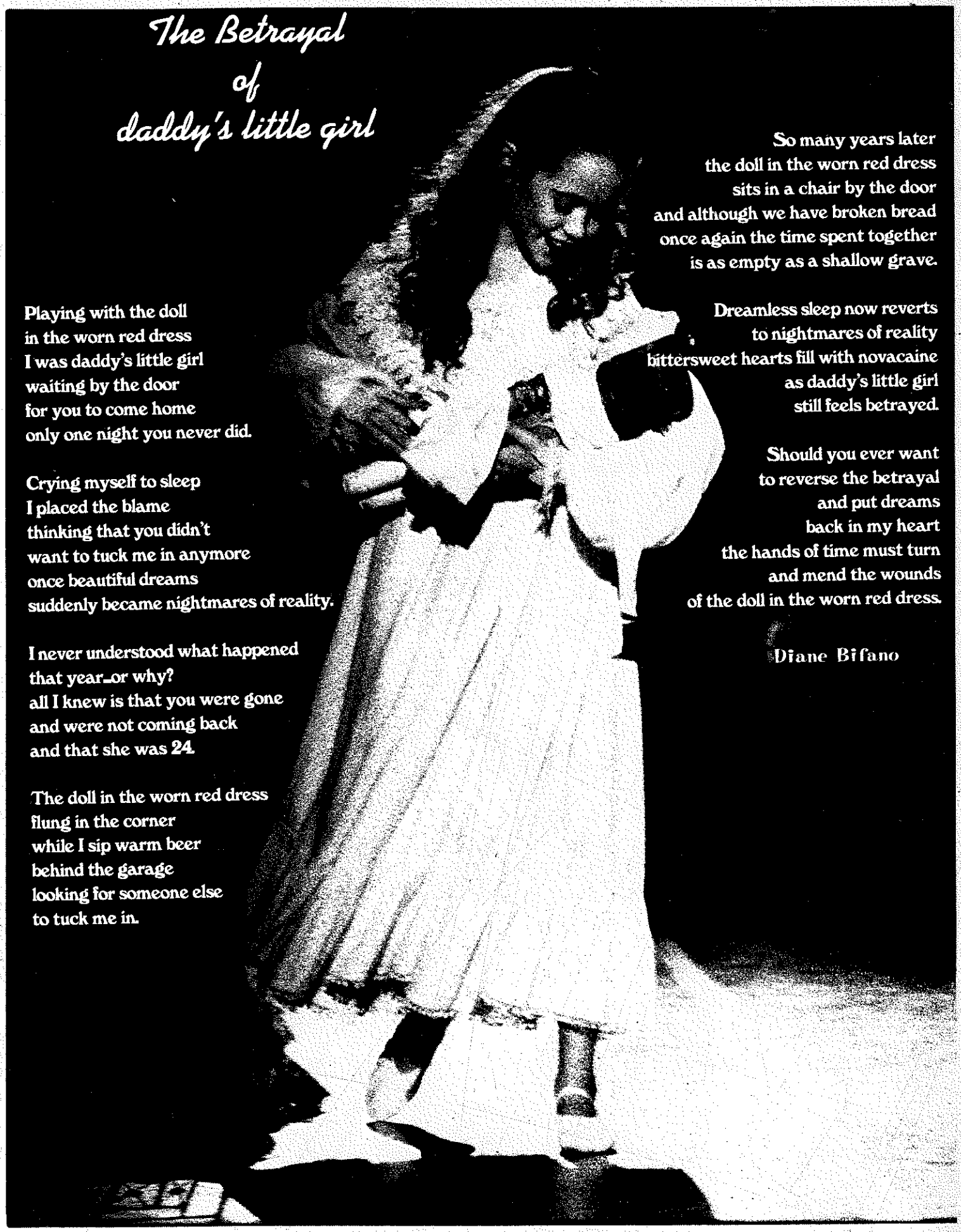
So out amongst the fields, we'll plant
Gardens of Can amidst the Can't
Before the ageless Hierophant

'Till sounds have emptied into Void
Let God protect his rhyme!

With ancient cities long destroyed
Like buried thoughts of Sigmund Freud
And Ghosts that dance in Nil!

Ken Duncan

The Betrayal of daddy's little girl



Playing with the doll
in the worn red dress
I was daddy's little girl
waiting by the door
for you to come home
only one night you never did.

Crying myself to sleep
I placed the blame
thinking that you didn't
want to tuck me in anymore
once beautiful dreams
suddenly became nightmares of reality.

I never understood what happened
that year—or why?
all I knew is that you were gone
and were not coming back
and that she was 24.

The doll in the worn red dress
flung in the corner
while I sip warm beer
behind the garage
looking for someone else
to tuck me in.

So many years later
the doll in the worn red dress
sits in a chair by the door
and although we have broken bread
once again the time spent together
is as empty as a shallow grave.

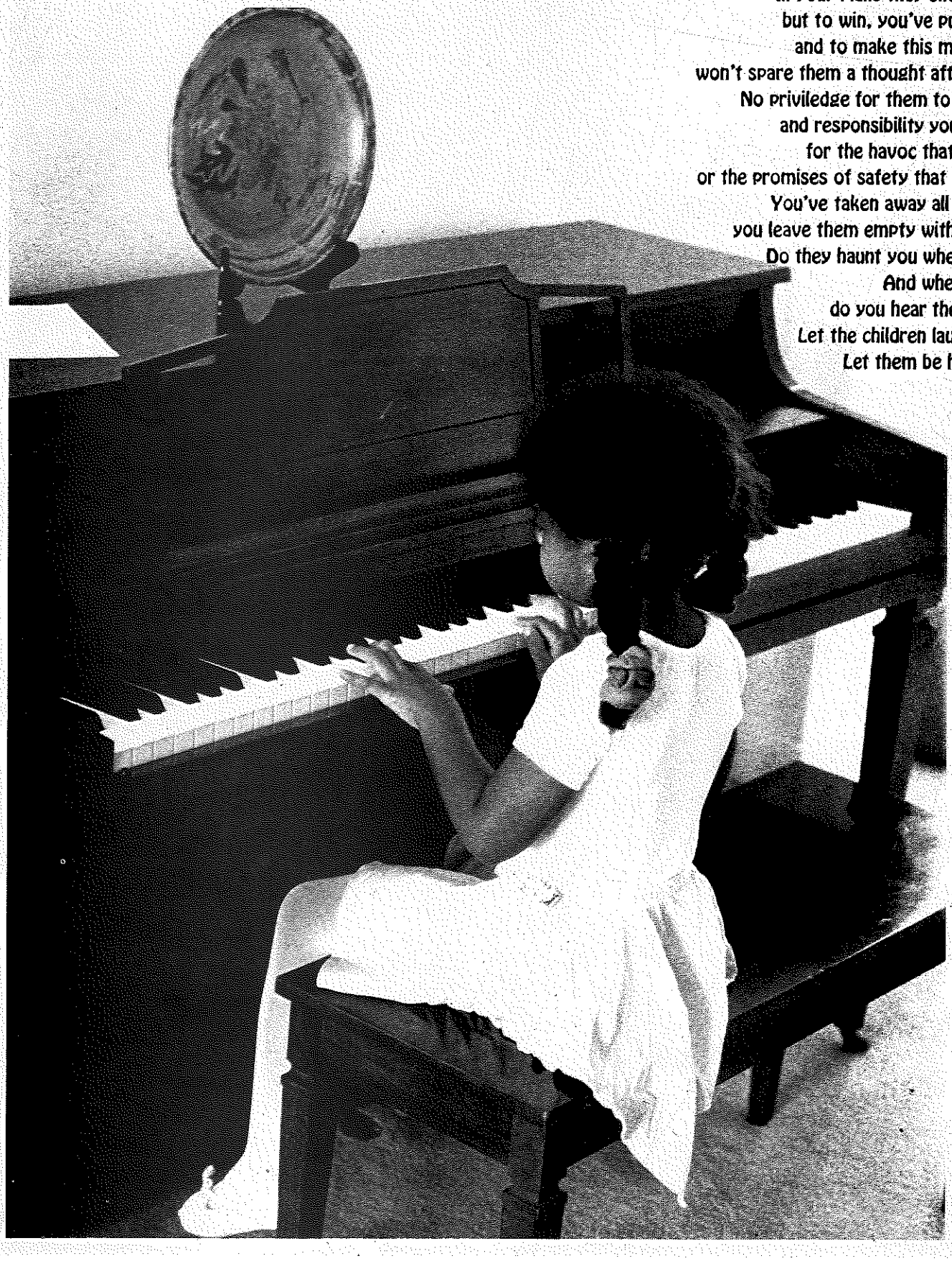
Dreamless sleep now reverts
to nightmares of reality
bittersweet hearts fill with novacaine
as daddy's little girl
still feels betrayed.

Should you ever want
to reverse the betrayal
and put dreams
back in my heart
the hands of time must turn
and mend the wounds
of the doll in the worn red dress.

Diane Bifano

For The Children

Miriam Dankberg



Let the children laugh and play,
they must live another day.
Stop your arguments and wars!
Their lives shouldn't up your score.
With the children lays the future
but not in hospitals with sutures.
In your plans they should be first,
but to win, you've put them last;
and to make this matter worst,
won't spare them a thought after the blast.
No privilege for them to stay awake,
and responsibility you won't take
for the havoc that you create,
or the promises of safety that you'll break.
You've taken away all their rights,
you leave them empty with no dreams.
Do they haunt you when you fight?
And when you sleep,
do you hear their screams?
Let the children laugh and play!
Let them be here to stay!

Homeward Bound

M. Elizabeth Dick

Racer paced. It wasn't a long pace; the dimensions of the hotel room confined him to three mid-length strides toward the bathroom door. He tried pacing down the wall by the tiny bed, but found he couldn't walk with his hands behind his head without scraping his elbows on the rough wallpaper.

The TV droned in the background; in three days he had been able to neither shut it down or off, and by now he was too embarrassed to call the manager about it. Cosby again. The French, they loved their Cosby. Twice a day and dubbed into French. Some sort of Christmas special now; the family gathered round and everyone smiling. He interrupted his pacing to find the clicker in the sweaty bed sheets and changed the channel. Even in a language he only half understood, the treacly sweetness of the Cosby Noel was sickening to him.

He shoved the bread-ends of a long-forgotten banana sandwich off the top of the mini-bar, opened it and reached for an Orangina. He remembered he'd had them both in a dreadful fit of wine-induced dry mouth and that the thin citrus soda had given him a near-life threatening case of the hiccups. I must get the old ticker checked when I get back to the States, he thought. I'm not getting any younger. He shrugged, closed the mini-bar, and reached for the side of the mini-bed and a bottle of duty-free Glenlivet.

Racer MacCallum poured himself a neat Scotch in a complimentary plastic cup he found in the mini-bathroom. He paced back across the floor and opened the window. A blast of wet European air bludgeoned his carefully moused hair. He listened to the distant sound of Christmas Eve church bells which filtered up to him over the noise of traffic on the nearby Champs-Elysses. He was still for a moment, quietly absorbing the beauty of music in Paris, which he had always loved. Which Ag had loved.

"Sod you!" he shouted out the window, in English, at the top of his lungs, to the great astonishment of an old man sweeping the sidewalk in the early afternoon shadows below.

Racer had liked Christmas only when he was with Ag; now she was gone. His childhood Noels merged in his mind into one muddy, muck-filled morass. By the time he came of age, his parents were already old; his sisters married and gone. The chores fell solely to him by the time he was ten, and he fled the farm just after his fifteenth birthday. Big Agatha Grantham, the switchboard operator for *The Stirling Observer* — three years his senior and taller by at least eight inches — had taken an interest in the scrawny little copy boy, and as she nurtured his career, Racer nurtured a courtship, and they were married when he was eighteen. She managed his career, his life. Ag wrote the checks and washed the dishes, kissed him lustfully as she dropped him off for yet another foreign foray.

She was his Gibraltar, that woman. Rock solid and loyal to the throne. Big Ag and the girls were the only family he had ever considered even remotely connected to himself. And yet, when his parents lost the farm, Racer moved to London. When his mother died, Racer left for the States. His father withered away shortly after, and the only way he knew was a terse missive from his oldest sister: "I hope you're happy now, Robert Bruce. We've all got our pensions and nothing else. All because you thought a newsroom was more important than a pig shed. Pa died in Glasgow Infirmary. He hadn't seen his land in five years, Moira."

The sooty city rain slapped Racer's wet face as he leaned further out the window. Paris is a rotten place to avoid Christmas, he thought. Last year, he'd been in the North of Scotland — with the excuse of visiting an ailing former colleague — in a cottage with a peat roof and coal fire, a full three miles from the nearest pub. He'd laid in supplies and hadn't left the wee shack (with the exception of visits to the outdoor privy) from the 21st of December until two days after Hogmanay, January 2nd. Two years ago it was Istanbul (an interview with one of Saddam Hussein's lieutenants), and, well, a Muslim city is a darn good place to run away from a Christian holiday. Three years ago ... three years ago ... when the memories of the farm had almost stopped haunting him ... when he'd found in himself that sense of wonder and naivete ... three years ago ...

He slammed the window shut and poured the cup to the rim. He was going nuts in there, bonkers, bloody loony. As bad as it was out there in the Catholic city, it was worse in the midget cell with the Cosby family.

He pulled on his worn sheepskin, locked his door with the brass skeleton key, rode down four floors in the mini-elevator with three Japanese tourists, and slipped out into a light mist. He trudged the two wet blocks to the Arc de Triomphe, and got on the Metro at the Avenue Mac Mahon. He was alone in the car except for a few old matrons with shopping bags, and he spent the ride staring at his reflection in the tunnel-darkened window. It was warm in the subway, and the Scotch was making him sweat. He thought about his daughters at home in Florida. What were they doing? Had they put the tree up? How had they spent the hundred-dollar checks he left them — if they hadn't bounced again this year?

He thought of their last Christmas together. They'd been on the phone the night of the twenty-third, as always. Racer always seemed to be boomeranging around the world in the winter. The holidays are the busiest time of the year for celebrity news, and, curiously, UFO sightings. Home for three days, gone for ten. Home for a weekend, gone for a fortnight. Racer didn't travel compulsively — he traveled relentlessly. At home with Julio Iglesias — a $10,000 story, more with pictures of the tree, and good for two or three years, too.

Ten grand or no, though, he'd always managed to be home for The Day, as Little Ag called it. He hadn't missed a holiday with Big Ag since their first one together with her par-

Homeward Bound

ents in the big cozy house called Dunalaistair. The first year he hadn't had to get up at five to milk the cows. The first year young Racer MacCallum had ever gotten a Christmas present. Those Christmases were his life, his reason. He looked forward to them like no six-year-old ever could. Until three years ago...

Three years ago, he'd been in Sioux City, Iowa, checking into a rash of UFO sightings for a German tabloid, which had gotten its lead out of the National Examiner, which had gotten its story from Racer MacCallum, who'd gotten it from a man who'd escaped from the Eli Lilly & Co. human test center in Indianapolis. Racer had said nothing about this and flown to Sioux City at the German's expense. What the hell, he'd never been there.

Christmas Eve, as Little Ag called it, the three of them — Ag, Andy, and Big Ag — had bought a tree and stood it in the living room of their cozy little home. Racer had bought his daughters each an Iowa doll — Andy, the tomboy, got the farmer, and Little Ag got a farm wife with a big pot of stew in her ample arms (cooking was Little Ag's passion — a strange hobby for a 12-year-old — but one the family encouraged for the selfish reason that she was so good at it).

The train pulled to a stop at Trocadero, and Racer's mind stood with it. His hands twitched in the heat of the underground. He was suffocating. His heart beat faster and he took out a small silver flask to ward of his arch enemy, his memory. As long as he was moving it was okay to know, okay for the past to run alongside him, all right for it to flow, just so long as he kept running slightly ahead of the water that might drown him.

The train lurched to a start again, and Racer breathed a sigh of relief into his whiskey. That last Christmas.

Little Ag and Andy were to decorate the tree while Big Ag picked up Racer at the airport (and they usually stopped at a motel on the way home — a sort of open secret in the family).

Racer sat for three hours in the airport bar. Ag was wont to be ten or twenty minutes late; she detested waiting and harbored a special hatred of baggage claim, but she had never, in twenty years of Racer's travels, ever failed to pick him up. He finally took a taxi. He never knew why he hadn't called home first, why he let it hit him like it did.

Andy and Little Ag knew something was wrong when the taxi pulled up. They were used to the two of them together, in love and radiant. But they hurried to the driveway anyway, confused, but happy to see their solitary father. Hugging, vaguely uneasy, he had the realization that his kids, then fifteen and twelve, had decorated the Christmas tree with empty Budweiser cans. He knew where they'd emptied them. His daughters were as drunk as he was.

Old Mrs. Nessor had run from across the street. "Hurry, there's been a terrible accident." A scream went up from the middle of the Earth through his body and into the heavens. "Yes, doctor, yes, I understand. Let her go. She wouldn't want to live like this..."

Motherless children.

Motherless child takes another sip of his whisky as he disembarks at Bir-Hakeim to witness the Eiffel Tower stretch into the sky. He thinks if he can find the top of the tower in the foreign mist he can follow his scream, and the memories will wash too far below him to ever hurt again.

He walked. Racer pounded the pavement till his fingers were numb inside his woolen pockets and his feet pressed sorely into the leather of his shoes. He went back underground at Invalides, and came out at St. Michel. He had the mind to go to Notre Dame and confess his sins to a God he did not know. Buy a candle and on the strength of a franc receive his forgiveness. Wander among the ancient saints and modern tourists and pray for deliverance from pickpockets.

He crossed onto the ile de le Cite at the Petit Pont and found his way to the Cathedral. He sat on a low stone wall outside in the drizzle and waited. He didn't know what he waited for: permission from God, a policeman to tell him to move along, Death himself in a Parisian beret.

He only knew that he could not go in, could not bear to defile the Catholic shrine with his Protestant presence, not on the eve of the holiest day of the year.

What he found was an angel. He hadn't noticed her at first, an indistinguishable sort of girl with long mousy hair and a long heavy skirt. She wore thick hiking boots, and an old surplus East German army jacket which stiffened her shoulders, though it was obviously three sizes too large, an she lovingly held a battered old brown guitar. She had been wearing an incongruous leather cowboy hat, and set it upside down at her feet.

She began to sing, a beautiful round, full alto which filled the square and seemed to surround Racer with a soft pillow of protection from the outside world. She coaxed sounds out of the old guitar with loving caresses, and Racer smiled for the first time in days. But it was WHAT she played that woke him out of his funk.

"...but all my words come back to me in shades of mediocrity..." He remembered his eighteen-year-old daughter's attempts at writing, his edits, the last argument before he left.

"Well, my stuff may not be GREAT, not yet, Racer, but at least I'm not settling for those two-bit rags you work for," Andy had screeched at him; "it might be a living, Race; but what you do is sure as hell not writing!"

"...Homeward Bound...I wish I was Homeward Bound...Home, where my thought's escaping..."

I wonder what little Ag's made for dinner tonight. That veal Marsala last week was exquisite. I wonder what bizarre story Andy's cooked up for the holidays. I wonder. Hmmm. I wonder what that young lass's lips would feel like on my thigh. He sipped from his flask and made his way across the square. He looked into her eyes and tossed a 50-franc note into her hat.

"Play that again for an old man, will ye, lass?"

"Thanks," said the girl. "No prob-

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lem." Very American. Probably Midwest, grew up in the city from the quickness of her speech. And had been traveling for a while in Europe. She was far too soft-spoken to have come from the States recently. American tourists, no matter how well-intentioned, almost always come across as boorish louts anywhere on the Continent.

She smiled up at him and began her song again. Religious pilgrims and tourists alike hurried by them, cowered low against the cold light mist. Paris is grey in the winter, but the girl's voice hit Racer like the bright, cheerful heat from the coal fire used to greet him at Aunt Kate's house in the Scottish hills after a long day in the fields of what should have been his childhood.

He saw with relief, too, that the girl was older than he had first thought. Her eyes were beginning to crow's-feet and there was a weariness in them that no one under thirty could know. Yet she was wastrel thin and vulnerable despite the bulkiness of her clothes, and she reminded him a little of Andy.

"...and each town looks the same to me, the movies and the factories, and every stranger's face I see..."

The girl looked at him and grinned, a wry and wary expression that was full of connection.

"...reminds me that I long to be...homeward bound..."

Racer laughed and sang the chorus along with her — twice, 'till she was laughing too at his voice, and he sat down beside her. Another fifty-franc note in the hat.

"That should take care of the day's work. What say we piss off and get something ta eat? Or a drink?" He handed her the flask.

"Thanks. I've been out here for two hours. I could use the warm-up. I'm Alanna. Nice to meet you."

"Racer. Racer MacCallum. World's greatest tabloid writer. Heard the name."

"No, but it sounds like interesting work, especially if it brings you to Paris for Christmas. I'll take you up on your offer by the way. I'm starving."

They found a cafe on the Right Bank just across the street from the Pont Neuf and ordered a carafe of the house wine.

"This stuff is dangerous, Love," said Racer. "Did you know that it's made by Orangina to cause you to consume lots of the vile juice in the wee hours of the night?"

Alanna laughed. "The first time I came to Paris, I met this wonderful guy Robert." She pronounced this Roe-bair. "He kept me in the cafes all night, you know, the romantic stroll down the Champs-Elysses, all the sights. I thought I was so in love. Hah. He took me to an after-hours club when I was drunk on this awful stuff, trusting. It was a strip joint. Turns out he was a pimp. So much for love." She raised her glass in a toast.

"What did you do?"

Her face moved down, a slow slouching of her entire body. Serious now.

"I ran. Four o'clock in the morning, running drunk out by the bus station at Porte de la Villette — you know what kind of neighborhood that is — the gendarmes picked me up and gave me to the Armee de Salut. I lay awake for three hours waiting for lesbians to rape me and wondering how I was going to get out of a foreign jail. I accidentally saw *Midnight Express* right before I left. I'd given up my family, had no friends. Totally rock bottom. It wasn't until morning I realized I was at the Salvation Army."

Racer laughed and raised his glass to hers. They clinked, and smiled at each other. "So did you find salvation?"

This time Alanna laughed.

"No, but I found a savior. One of the girls in there spoke some English and helped me out. She showed me where to beg and taught me a little French and a few chords on the guitar. This is hers, you know; she gave it to me when she went back home. Colette. It's been almost eight years now since she left. I've been all over Europe and into Asia since then." She sighed. "That's where I'm going now, by the way."

"Into Asia?"
"Home."
"Home?"
"Home."

"And where might that be?" Racer asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Columbus, Ohio." She had a far-away look in her hazel eyes. He could see she missed it, missed the heartland of it. Missed the mundane midwesterness.

"You'd leave Paris, France, for Columbus, Ohio, United States of America?" Racer asked incredulously.

"Wouldn't you? Trade this for a stable life, knowing where you're going to sleep tonight and what you're going to have for dinner?"

"Finish your wine. I want to show you something," Racer told her, downing his. He dribbled a little down his beige-pocketed shirt, leaving a telltale maroon stain. He threw a hundred francs on the table, grabbing Alanna's arm and pulling her from her seat.

"Racer," she giggled, a little drunk now, then serious again. That wary look. "Why should I trust YOU?"

"I might be prostituting myself, love, my trade is not an honorable one, but I assure you I haven't that intention with you. Hop to it, dear, it'll be dark soon."

Racer dragged Alanna out into the street and down into the labyrinthine caverns of the Chatelet-Les Halles station.

"If you have so much money," asked the girl as they walked, "how come we're not taking a cab?"

"I like the darkness of the Metro. I like the warrens and I like the Louvre station. It's nice to see proper art in the subway for a change. I like the sound of the trains and I like the heat. But most of all I like the simple little maps. I have a terrible sense of direction."

It had been so long since she'd been able to exist in English, think in English, relax into the native tongue, that Alanna let herself go and trusted the strange Scotsman, let him lead her through two line changes. They exited at Anders, and she was more than a little angry.

"What's this?" Are you taking me to Place Blanche? I already told you

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I wasn't hooker material. Nine years on the road and I still can't tell the difference between a decent man and scum." She let herself slip back into an Americanism. "Shit."

"Alanna. Alanna, I haven't taken you here for that. I already told you that. I should have gotten you something to eat. I'm sorry. There are other things in Montmarte. I want you to see this. Trust me. Just for another half an hour."

He moved his hand through his hair in such a gesture of desperation, that Alanna felt sorry for him, grieved for the cause of his loneliness, followed him through the narrow hilly streets, up. Up a million goddamn stairs, so it felt like the breath was being pulled from her lungs by the basilica of the Sacre-Coeur itself. What if it was the basilica of the Sacre-Pouman, she thought. The Sacred Lung. Would God himself push the air into me and propel me up the stairs? They came to the top in the twilight but instead of leading her to the church, Racer pulled his charge to the left and down into a park made of round pebbles and small, scrappy shrubs.

It overlooked the whole of Paris. An old man played accordion behind and above them. The brisk walk had sobered them both a bit, but Racer pulled his trusty flask from his coat and handed Alanna a sip. It was quiet in the mist but for the music and the cold in their ears. A clear strip of blue appeared in the south, then grew and spread into orange-red. The lights of Paris winked on one by one and still the old man played. When a deep blue replaced red, and they could see the Eiffel Tower light up if they looked round the hill and over a bush, the old man played on.

"You would give up THIS," Racer swept his arm across the panorama, "for Columbus, Ohio."

Alanna looked at her feet. "Yes." She whispered the single word as an anthem of longing. "Yes."

They sat in silence until the blue became black and all the lights of the city were before them. The old man had stopped playing, but he lay slouched with his back against a wall, his moustache caved over a toothless mouth, still watching the sky. It was Allana this time that gave money, all 100 francs she'd gotten from Racer.

"Merci," she told him simply. "Merci."

"What did you do that for?" asked Racer, when they had walked down the steep streets to the place Pigalle. "That was all I gave you."

"He played the sunset over Paris for himself. I played it for the playing of it, for the tourists, for you. He played it only because it was there and he loved it."

She shrugged. "There's something I want to show you now, Mr. McCallum. A little bit of MY Paris."

They got on the Metro again, changing for one stop at Barbes-Rouchechouart, arriving at the Gare du Nord after dark.

"Alanna," nudged Racer, filling his speech with the Gaelic intonation like he did when he was drunk, or afraid. The Gare du Nord is nae place to go oot at night."

"I know," she said, and led him through its corridors.

He thought it was in Ligne 5, the one that takes you to the Gare de l'Est, that they found the band. Just a ragtag bunch of teenagers, all with instruments. A small symphony in adolescence in a minor chord from the school of the streets. A young boy with elderly eyes slipped a rusted flute under his lips. Between notes he took long puffs from an unfiltered Gauloise, which he laid on the filthy ground while he played. His fingers were already stained with the nicotine.

"Where the hell are his parents?" asked Racer quietly, angrily, as the man-child lobbed echoes of sorrow off the tunnel walls. The boy's cheeks were sunken, with the blowing, with drugs, with starvation, Racer could not fathom. "Doesn't the boy have ANYONE?" he whispered to Alanna.

Shock. Where the hell were HIS kid's parents? Drunk in a subway 3,000 miles away with a woman twenty years his junior. Jesus! Santa Claus wouldn't be there in the morning for them, just like he'd forgotten little Robert Bruce McCallum so many years ago. While he was out milking cows. While Andy did laundry. While Little Ag cooked.

He closed his eyes to the flute, let the music wash over him. Let it hurt. Stood still for once and let the wave catch him. Drunk in the Metro, and held captive by the tune of a very solitary sailor letting the tide finally drown him in its pain. It came through his eyelids in a single salt tear, and the boy watched it and stopped playing. Stared at Racer only silently.

Racer did not give this boy any money; did not think it would mean anything to him. But he reached into his wallet and pulled out his card.

"Si vous avez besoin de queiques choses, telephonez a moi," he told the boy — if you need anything call me — though he knew the young flute player would be too proud to ever ask anyone for anything. The boy reminded him of Little Ag. Of himself. Too independent too young. He turned to Alanna: "I have to get out of here." Tightly, very tightly.

He did not want to see more of the subway, did not want to know more of the Paris night. They clambered out of the Gare du Nord and into a taxicab.

"Hotel Star De L'Etoile, rue de l'Arc de Triomphe," Racer told the driver.

"You didn't have any place you wanted to be dropped off, did you?"

Alanna shook her head. "My hostel, but I've got a couple of francs. I can get back there later if I want. And I have my guitar. Your room does have a patch of floor I can camp on, doesn't it?"

"Aye, it does," said Racer. "If you're under six-foot tall and dinny mind yer feet hanging off into the bathroom."

Alanna laughed. "I'm five-two, and I sleep in the fetal position. I don't suppose you have an extra teddy bear."

"Na, but if you want to sleep in the fetal shape, yer heed'll be half into the next room."

Racer paid the driver and they walked through the lobby to the elevator, stopping at the front desk for the key and messages.

"No messages, Mr. MacCallum."

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The clerk smirked. He knew the old man would be good for a broad or two. Racer gave him the British fingers as the elevator doors closed.

"Now that, Mr.Tabloid Reporter, I believe was defending the honor of a lady."

"My God, where? Where did you see a lady?"

Alanna just laughed and slapped Racer a good one on the butt. The best swing the tiny elevator would allow, anyway. Racer opened the door and the girl swung her guitar through the slim opening. She chuckled, an open happiness that Racer hadn't heard from her before.

"You weren't kidding, were you? I've seen a lot of them, Racer McCallum, but this is quite possibly the smallest hotel room I have ever been in."

"Try going to the bathroom," he told her. "See if you can sit and shut the door at the same time."

"I think I just might. I'm desperate. And remember: I'm only five-two." Alanna maneuvered herself into the privy laughing.

Racer heard her knees knocking the door. "They're under the sink now, MacCallum," She called through the door. "Even I can't sit straight in this place."

When she was done, her boots were left under the sink, and Racer could see two layers of dirty wool socks. She sat on the bed and she smelled like soot and traffic and the Metro.

"Do you want to go to bed now, MacCallum? Do you?" He couldn't tell if she was drunk or desperate or sober and wise; he couldn't bring himself to take advantage of her. Big Ag and the kids sat on his mind like a thousand-pound rock with a layer of peanut butter underneath.

He longed for his home, his own bed, an argument with at least one of his and Ag's two headstrong daughters, for the comfort he had found. He knew he had to go home. He needed his life, needed his daughters as much as they needed him.

But he needed this girl now, in this tiny Parisian room, needed her American voice against the drone of the foreign telly. He knew he was lonely. Now he knew why.

She leaned on him and he leaned into the mini-bar and pulled out a couple of airline bottles of Dewar's. Four dollars a piece at the current exchange rate.

"Love," he said, and he shivered. "Play that song for me one more time."

She took one of the proffered bottles and took her guitar out of its bag. Took a swig. Set the bottle down and gave her last performance in Paris.

"I'm sittin' in the railway station,
Got a ticket for my destination.
Mm.
On a tour of one night stands
My suitcase and guitar in hand
And every stop is neatly planned
For a poet and a one-man band.
Homeward Bound. I wish I
was...
Homeward Bound."

Racer did not sing the chorus with her this time; The MacCallum was in a deep comforting sleep before the melody of the second verse tumbled from her sweet young mouth. He lay flat on his back, on two-thirds of the tiny bed, a solid soft man-snore emanating from his long crooked nose.

Alanna crawled into bed beside him, feeling safe for the first time in months, knowing the traveling was almost over, her ticket home burning warmth into her chest from the rough East German army jacket she refused to remove. She laid her arm gently across the wine-stain on Racer's shirt and fell asleep.

Racer MacCallum woke before the sun on a Christmas Day in Paris, France. There was a warm woman in a rough coat beside him on the bed, and he had a vague remembrance of wanting to go home, of wanting his own bed in his own house, of waking to the smell of Little Ag's breakfast. As he came to, he remembered his hammock in the shady cool back yard that would be comfortable even at this time of year in Florida. He missed his office-cat and the soft blue light of the Southern season.

He slipped downstairs to the payphone at 5 a.m., not wanting to wake the girl who had awakened him from the three years of his desperate, emotional slumber, and he made a reservation on Air France for the following day. He'd have left on Christmas, but nothing in a Catholic city is open on the holy day. C'est la fete. Fermee. He called Ag and Andy; it was only 11 p.m. in Florida. Wished them Merry Christmas. Told them he'd be home and not to cash the checks; he was bringing real presents this year.

He went back upstairs to his room. The girl was still there. I like women in the morning, he thought. They're twice as pretty without the makeup. And twice as warm. He put his hand to Alanna's cheek. "Thank you." He whispered in the darkness, and fell asleep again, content.

When he awoke there were French sheets where the East German coat had been. The girl was gone.

A Christmas Carol, he tried to tell himself. The ghosts have visited me instead of Scrooge. I have not seen the best and worst of Paris with the best and worst of an American woman. He was almost hoping.

I have not made the reservations for home; I have not spoken with my kids for the first time in three Christmases. But the longing for home clung to him like a popular TV jingle.

"Home, where my thought's escaping..."

I am only stuck in a Catholic city with my fears and my guilt and my loss.

"Home, where my love lies waiting..."

He could, for a second, imagine that he had imagined it all. He had drunk the Scotch in the mini-bar by himself, the scent of a traveled woman on his sheets was wishful thinking. The song had come into his head entirely independent of outside sources. He almost had himself believing it had never happened.

'Til he found her guitar leaning up against the toilet.

That guitar.

Maybe Little Ag'll like it, thought Racer as he threw his suitcase onto the tiny bed to pack. She always did have a creative bent.

Slanted Rain

I saw Paris once. It wasn't springtime or anything. In fact, it was horribly cold and nothing bloomed. It's funny, but to hear the poets talk it's always spring in Paris.

I didn't see the Louvre, or anything else on the travel brochure, come to think of it. But one night, when the wind blew horribly cold and the complimentary cheese lay uneaten on the silver tray on the bellboy's cart, the clouds cleared and I saw the silhouette of the Eiffel Tower against the moon. Cast iron bars trying vainly to case the sky. It captivated me. At nights, late nights when the smoke from the cafe had left my eyes and the jazz music floated on gossamer wings through open cab windows, I would sit and watch the Eiffel. I always wondered about him. Gustav Eiffel, that is. Why had he done it? Why try to do what cannot be done? If something is impossible, why even attempt it? Was he trying to leave a monument for the world to see and succeed? Or was he trying to cage the wind, and failed? Paris didn't impress me. Gustav Eiffel did.

But, another thing from Paris stuck with me. It seemed like every time it rained, it rained at a slant. It was never the straight, torrential downpour of Florida, nor was it the butterfly-scattered drops of Louisiana mist. It was slanted in from the East, slanted in from the West, coming around a corner, fleeing an awning, hurling around light posts like meteor showers around the Millennium Falcon. It never gave itself fully; always promised the relief of rain. It snuck in, like Boston Blackie in a liquid trench coat. When you thought it would rain, it didn't; and when you thought it wouldn't come, it did anyway. Always, at a slant. Always cold.

Her eyes reminded me of the rain in Paris. Slanted cold sapharistic shields hiding emotional knights in the Camelot of her mind. Sneaky; blue without being blue. Contemplating; inquisitive, yet full of her own life, so as to not need any part of mine. They were intoxicating me. The same way that the Eiffel had. They had the same quality of trying to cage me, trying to bring back days long gone where anything was possible. Before I got into the rut I'm in. Before I came to Dallas. Before she had ever spoken to me.

"Name's Karma." She grinned, extending her delicate lace of a hand.

"Robert," I replied, without taking the appendage, "Robert Standard."

"Ordinary enough." Slyly, she moved her hands beneath the bar and placed a coaster on the counter. Then, without speaking, she turned and began mixing a drink with the army of bottles arrayed on the shelves behind her.

She whirled back around, in an amazing short period of time, and placed a glass on the coaster in front of me, "Scotch and soda, right?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Well, you do come in here everyday and order the same thing, I figured that you're pretty much a regular." She stooped low, picking up more beer pretzels from their home in the cardboard box on the floor. With the aid of her smooth hands they found their way to the fake wooden bowls on the bar top. I sipped my scotch and rubbed my knee. I desperately wanted to talk to her again and the apprehension of that feeling sent chills of expectancy down my spine.

"So...where are you from, uh...Karma, was it?" She nodded in accordance.

"Karma means what goes around..."

"Comes back around..." I cut her off. "Yeah, I know, your parents were ex-hippies, huh?"

"'Fraid so." The jukebox started up, finally getting to my song. The Beatles. Always loved the Beatles. Loved the way the harmony from the sun mixes with the clink of whiskey bottles. The song started up, [Lovely Rita, meter maid, lovely Rita, meter maid]. It's so much like poetry it's scary. I studied Karma's looks. A very slender, curvy girl, with dark, auburn hair and blue eyes. Short hair, barely touching her shoulders. Short hair, like Mom's. [Standing by the parking meter, when I caught a glimpse of Rita, filling in the ticket in her little black book] She glides across the hardwood floor like the Bismark on the high seas. Swish, swish of cotton leggings against nylon skirt, clink of ice on glass, whoosh of hair on ivory skin. Captivating, but it's almost 5:15. I always leave here at 5:15. [In her hat she looked much older, and a bag across her shoulder made her look a little like a military man] Funny how it's always cold in here, but they still have paddle fans going. Seems no matter where I go in Dallas there's a paddle fan going. She probably doesn't want to talk to me anyway. Probably thinks I'm a schmuck, probably...

"Hey, Bob. Whatcha thinkin' about?" Karma says between lips of red; jewels set into a crown of a face.

"I was thinking that 'the woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep.'"

"Robert Frost, right?" She grinned. I looked at her quizzically, wondering what a barmaid knows of quoted lines. Funny thought coming from a doorman. She must have picked up on my look because she answered, "I majored in American Literature in college. It's my pastime. When I'm not sloppin' drinks, that is." [I took her out, tried to win her, had a laugh over dinner. I told her that I would really love to see her again. They dropped the check and Rita paid it. I took her home. I nearly made it, sitting on the sofa with a sister or two].

"Yeah, it's Frost. Not my pastime, though. Just my passion." 5:13. I gotta go. I won't make the 5:30 bus if I don't. God I wanted to keep talking to her. All night. Her, me, and Walt Whitman over candlelight. Sarah's home by now. Good old Sarah, good old Dallas. I got to go.

"Hey, Bob. I get a break in ten minutes. Wanna go get a sandwich?" She looked at her watch as she talked, looked at me when she finished. Paddle fans in really cool bar. Cheap wood flying above on an insane mission to cool people who don't even care. A sandwich would be nice. 6:14 [Lovely Rita, meter maid. Lovely Rita, meter maid. Lovely Rita, meter maid. Lovely Rita, meter maid]. Gotta wash my uniform tonight. Clint Black is on the Tonight Show, later on. It's Thursday, we always have chicken on Thursday. I love Sarah's chicken.

"I'd like to, but I can't. I have to be leaving." Don't go, idiot. A sandwich. Could have chicken salad. "I hope I see you again tomorrow, Karma. Nice talking." Shake the hand this time, moron.

"O.K., Bob. Remember, I'm Karma. I'll come around again." A slight smile, parting of lips, shaking of hands, wood callused on elephant's tusk. Scent lingers even after I'm gone, after the bus, after the chicken cacciatore. Sarah's here. Long, blonde hair on tight fuzzy pink sweaters. Chicken on Thursday and Clint Black on the Tonight Show. Jay Leno wears those crappy suits. You'd think a millionaire could buy something a little nicer than that. Especially,

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on national T.V. But I guess when you're on national T.V. every night, even that gets boring. It's all relative. Same apartment, same girlfriend, same boring suits on Jay's body. Tile in bathroom needs fixing. A little chip by the tub, and you could have permanent water damage. Tomorrow's Friday. I mail bills on Friday. Light bill, phone bill, water bill. Pay for the same water that could be ruining my tile. Same old Dallas. Wish I could change.

"You O.K., honey?" Loving eyes, funny how someone can look at you with lovingness, and you simply cannot return that look.

"I'm fine. I'm always fine." The vast majority of men lead their lives in quiet rebellion. Walt Whitman.

"O.K., honey, you like Clint Black, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do." She knows that. Same old conversations. Lying in bed I watch the neon lights flash on and off, on and off. Arrows pointing the way. But they all point different ways. Which do you follow? That's always life. Neon is just a gas with electricity running through it. Nothing more than any of us. Yet it knows that way. They all point different directions, but maybe they will meet in the end. Destiny. Kismet. Karma.

Even opening doors doesn't help today. If misery loves company, my head must be a meeting hall. The rain is really cold. It splatters on my skin like little liquid kamikaze pilots, driving their planes straight to oblivion. I shove the little rectangle box back into my uniform pocket, right in with the lint balls and subway tokens. I light the cigarette and the flame from the match reminds me of the torch at the Olympics, ceremonial in some way. Taxies and busses rush by. Does anybody drive their own car anymore? All busses and taxies, subways and trolleys. Take a plane to go to the grocery store. Drive-thru liquor stores. Does that beat all? Tell us not to drink and drive, then invent drive-thru liquor stores, for that wino on the go, heh? That was kind of funny. I used to be funnier, long ago. Used to be. That's all my life is. Used to be's.

Sidewalk flies beneath my feet. I've never walked this fast just to get to Joe's before. 3:35. I'm early. I don't necessarily like to be early. Hope she's working.

I feel the gust of wind as soon as I open the door. A whoosh of cold and smoke, dust and chalk from pool tables, wind and whiskey. My hopes fall a little when I don't catch her scent on the breeze. My trench coat hugs the side of my legs, cold and wet and tired. The knob of my walking cane smoothes out against my hand, rap tap on the floor. I sit on my stool, the only one that has never been occupied all the years I've been coming here. I prop the cane on the stool next to mine and rub my knee. Apparently, I sat down too fast and now my temples are throbbing. I lowered my head and rubbed it, pushing the hat embroidered with Lincoln Towers on the brim, off. I guess she's not working. I slowly accepted it. The throbbing stopped and I raised my head. Karma stood before me.

" 'And his eyes have all the seeming...' " she quoted, pulling on her hair, " 'of a demon's that is dreaming...' "

" 'And the lamplight over him streaming casts an eerie shadow on the floor. And my soul that lies floating in that shadow on the floor, shall be lifted, ah, never more.' Edgar Allan Poe," I said matter of factly.

"Scotch and soda?" I merely nodded. The jukebox didn't play today, and the paddle fans were on low. The room was unnervingly quiet, just her and me. We talked of roads not taken and trials of men's souls. She proved to be interesting to say the least. Wild and interesting, somehow untamable, even at the ripe age of 28. She told me she was living in her car. She said she travels the country, working in bars. Her life was intoxicating, inebriating. She vibrated vitality. And I believe that I love her.

5:20, and I still stayed. But only for the five minutes. Then I left. And walked even faster. I made the five-thirty bus, home by 6:15. Friday night's pizza or sub? I feel like a meatball.

Looking through the mail when I got home, a manila envelope falls out. Stamped with the same Zip Code as the postcard I got from California. The postcard I got three days earlier, from a hospital in San Francisco, the postcard signed by my father. It said he was dying. A brain tumor in the frontal lobe or something. It was the first time I had heard from my father in 30 years. What the hell is a frontal lobe? I wish I could see him once more, talk to him, but when he left my mother and me, he left me no choice but to hate him and resent him. It changed my life totally. I vowed never to let that happen again. The worst thing about it is that it changed my routine. It was the day innocent playfulness died.

The manila envelope was from Salinas. It contained a documental letter sent Priority Mail from a company called Jones Canning Jones. Abner Jones. I served with him in the Navy fifteen years ago. When his rifle went off accidentally while he was cleaning it, the bullet lodged in my interior civciate ligament, forever dooming me to a limp and early discharge. He kept in touch for a couple of years, trying to make up for it, I guess. Now he owns his own company and wants me to be regional head. Good job, good opportunity, in California. Leaving Dallas would kill me. Sarah wouldn't go. Her mother is here in Dallas, and with her old age and all...plus, Sarah loves Dallas. She would never leave this for me, no matter how much she thinks she loves me.

This would change everything I know. Everything I am. You can't teach an old dog new tricks, and horses with a limp are often shot. Still...good job, good pay. Maybe a life...a life without Sarah. Still, I don't think I love Sarah, at least no more than the other girls I left for no reason. Just because they compromised my lifestyle. What is my lifestyle...doing the same thing, day in, day out? Good job, good opportunity. In California. What the hell is a frontal lobe? Why did he leave us like that? My knee's starting to hurt. Take the job, dummy. Reminds me of a quote "In a minute there is time for decision and revisions which a minute will reverse." Love song of "J. Alfred Prufrock." Funny, there's no paddle fans in my house. "Dare I disturb the universe?" Lots of beaches in California.

"H'lo, Bob." The jangle of Sarah's keys as she takes them out of the lock behind her shakes me to awareness. The fuzzy sweater with the little name tag "Hello, my name is SARAH," scarf I bought her for Christmas last year. Doesn't match the outfit but she wears it anyway.

"Hi, Sarah." The envelope slipped away from me. Slipped back down into the darkness of unforgiving pasts. It's always so easy. So easy to make any decision at all. So easy to slip back into the same old routines and never challenge the universe. So easy that I've been doing it my whole life.

"What're we having for dinner, honey," I only hear her ask the question peripherally, out of the side of my eyes. If she's expecting an answer, I haven't one to give. I don't know

Slanted Rain

any. But the neon signs outside do. Pointing off to the horizon. One points South, to the Gulf. One points west, to the ocean, and one's burned out.

"I don't know, honey, what's today? Saturday? We have soup on Saturdays."

"Why do you insist on sticking to that. For God's sake, Robert, you sound like Rain Man. Lets go get Chinese."

"Maybe you're right." A chicken salad sandwich would be good.

Monday afternoon. I'm back at Joe's. Karma sets the Scotch in front of me, and I drink it, but it tastes bitter. The ice is hard and square in the bottom of the short, clear glass. Karma is like a bee, flitting from bottle to bottle, sucking the nectar that has fermented for years and years out of its home in decorative bottles, pouring it into little glasses and dispensing it to the worker drones. She leans across the bar at me, asking if I want another. I order a whiskey this time. Dad always drank whiskey. On Sunday afternoons he would sit and watch World War II movies and James Bond flicks, whiskey in one hand and a stogie in the other. Best to avoid him on Sundays. Best to avoid him on any day. But now, now I don't have to avoid him. The worst is over, isn't it? Now he is old and weak and dying in that hospital in San Francisco...

"Whiskey this time, huh, Bob?" She asks filling the shot glass. I stare at her from under my brim, stare at her smooth skin and wonder how it would feel to hold her, caress her, too callused. Doorman's hands through her auburn hair and stare long into those liquid eyes.

It rained all day today. Not much business at the hotel. Hard rain. Straight down in long, drawn out sheets. Pelted the passerbys to where none could get much done. But hey, at least the paddle fans are still going.

"Robert." I'm still gone when I hear her calling like those people who tell of after-death experiences, where the whole tunnel is dark except for the light, and a voice calls you back to consciousness. "Robert, Hey, Bob!"

"Huh? Yeah, Karma?" I answer, pretending like my heart doesn't do back flips every time she calls my name.

"Hey, y'know, it's not rainin' like this every where. The weather said it was nicer in Galveston." She looks at me with those eyes, expecting something, nervous about something. She's a free spirit you know.

"And what, pray tell, do you want me to do about the weather in Galveston." I ask, teasingly.

"Silly!" She says, leaning on the bar with her elbow. "I want you to take me there!" My heart almost exploded. Was she being serious, was this a real invitation?

"What do you mean, Karma?"

"Well, my friend has a time share there, right on the beach, and he couldn't use it this month, so he said I could. But Galveston by yourself can be awfully lonely."

I couldn't believe it. She was asking me to go to Galveston Bay with her for a week. Sun, surf, and me. It was enough to kill a guy. She's wild, crazy, unpredictable. It would be the best week of my life. It would kill Sarah. Fuzzy sweaters with blood stains on them. Karma's life essence is addictive. I could lay there and soak it up all day. All week. We always have chicken on Thursdays. I love Sarah's chicken. Karma looks at me with those eyes, amber on ivory. She waits. I know it. She can feel it. The neon signs blink on and off across the street. Delicatessen. Delicatessen. Delicatessen. Subs. Subs. Blink. Blink. Heat, cold, heat cold. A chicken salad sandwich would be nice. It's a good job, good opportunity. In California. [Hello, my name is Sarah]. The Beatles in the background. [One sweet dream. Pick up the bags, get in the limousine. Soon we'll be away from here, step on the gas and wipe that tear away. One sweet dream came true today]. Chink, chink of whiskey bottles. Satan's little soldiers, go out, do my bidding, intoxicate them. Galveston is sunny this week. But, hey, it's always raining somewhere. Anytime you say that. Where exactly is the frontal lobe located. I would assume it's in the front of something. Most probably one of your lobes, whatever the hell that is.

"Robert?" She is still staring. Oh, God, she's still staring. "Galveston?"

"Y'know, Karma, this reminds me of a story I heard one time. There was this guy that went to the movies every day and watched 'Ben Hur,' y'know, with Charleston Heston? Anyway, he went like fifty times, and one day the man who sold the tickets asked him, why he would watch the same movie every day. And he told the guy," 'Y'know that part where 'Ben Hur's' wheel falls off in the chariot race,' "and the guy says," 'yeah?; well,' "the guy says," 'Sooner or later, that's not going to happen to Ben Hur, and Ben's wheels will stay on.'"

She just stared at me. Eyes of liquid, slanted through a face that could kill a man. "So?" She asked.

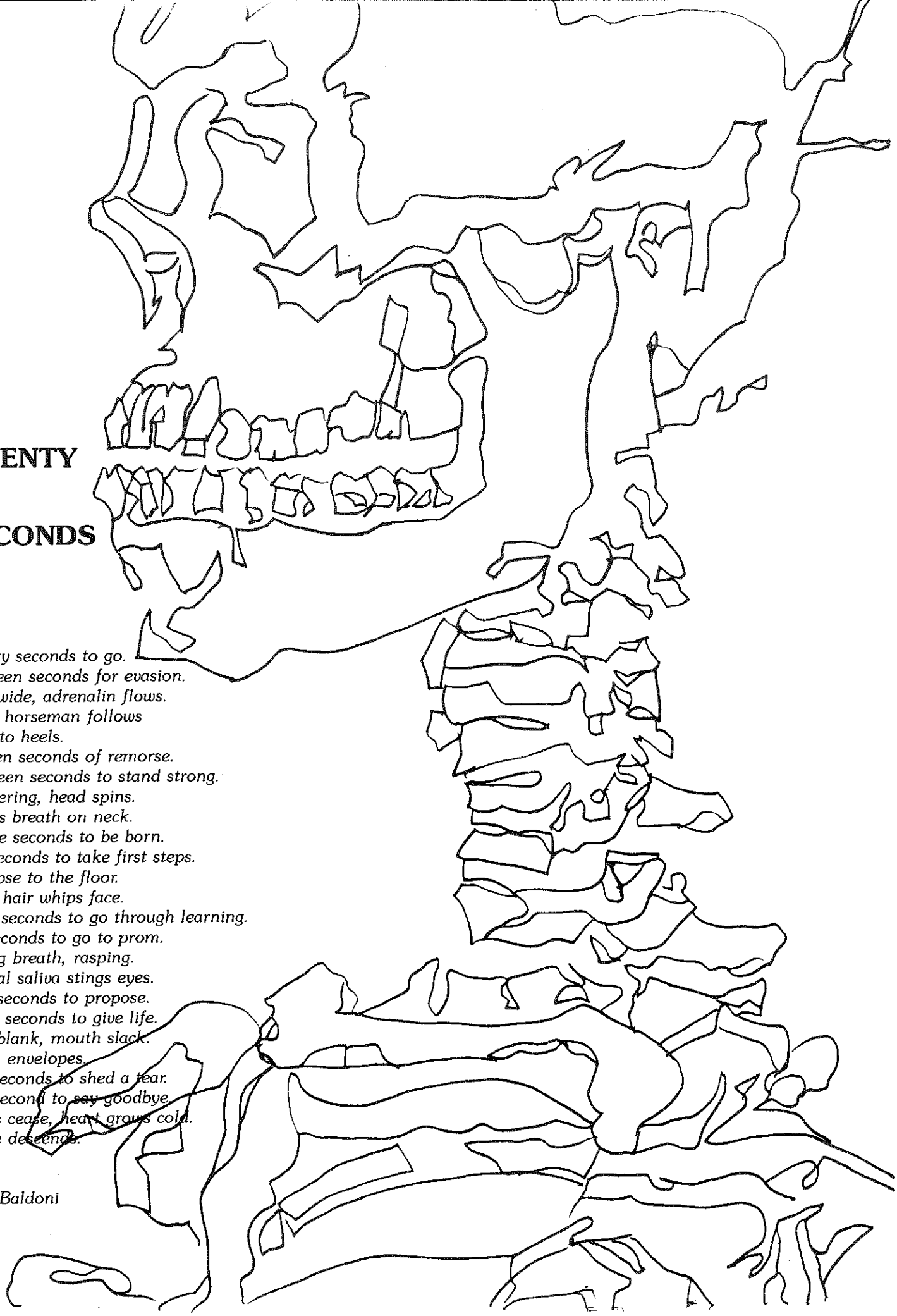
"So..." I started, then took the last of my whiskey and stood up, grabbing my walking cane. "Sooner or later, my wheels will stay on." I tipped my hat forward and limped out of Joe's, for the last time.

The rain had stopped, and the steam rolled off the streets in long, thin bends. I found myself across the street from Joe's, in front of the neon staring at chicken salad through little panes of deli plexi-glass. I ordered a sandwich and stepped out into the afternoon air. It was about 5:30, but who's watching the clock anyway. I was right. The sandwich was good.

I stepped out from the awning underneath the Salinas Downtown Bus Station neon sign and into the cold night air. I lit a cigarette and stared down the street at a little bar called Indian Trails. It had paddles fans, but they weren't working. I looked down at the bus ticket in my hands, the ticket I had bought with my first week's wages working for Abner Jones. Salinas was nice. Abner Jones' canning company was a terrific job. No regrets were worth the price of a terrific job, and the only regret I had was never saying goodbye to Sarah. Maybe I'll send her a postcard from Hollywood. I read the front of the ticket to make sure they got it right. The 5:30 to San Francisco. The bus that would take me to my father. Take me back in time, like some sort of futuristic machine. But that same machine could be my ticket to the future as well. And at least now I would know. The old Paris feeling had come back to me. Now it would be my turn. Now I would try to cage the wind.

The rain started again, but this time, it fell at a slant. Not a torrential downpour of Florida, not the drops of Louisiana mist. Not the constant sheets of Dallas. But slanted and sly. As I walked toward my bus, I thought of ivory skin and fuzzy sweaters, chicken on Thursdays and Scotch and soda. And, the jazz music floated on Gossamer Wings through open cab windows. I hoped frontal lobe problems weren't heredity, and I flicked my cigarette under the bus tires.

Chadwick Anthony Kirk



TWENTY SECONDS

Twenty seconds to go.
Eighteen seconds for evasion.
Eyes wide, adrenalin flows.
Black horseman follows
close to heels.
Sixteen seconds of remorse.
Fourteen seconds to stand strong.
Staggering, head spins.
Mare's breath on neck.
Twelve seconds to be born.
Ten seconds to take first steps.
Collapse to the floor.
Mane hair whips face.
Eight seconds to go through learning.
Six seconds to go to prom.
Losing breath, rasping.
Animal saliva stings eyes.
Four seconds to propose.
Three seconds to give life.
Eyes blank, mouth slack.
Cloak envelopes.
Two seconds to shed a tear.
One second to say goodbye.
Lungs cease, heart grows cold.
Sickle descends.

Gino Baldoni



metamorphosis

i was born into love as a neophyte
a child in a new land of misty feelings
i adapted well in the primordial sea of knowing and trust
a single-celled being with my only needs being simple and
all-fulfilling
as time and experience went on, i found myself having to evolve
so much like the prehistoric animals
who were suddenly confronted with the shifting land masses and
harsh climates, i , too, discovered the hurt of rejection
the ice cold fingers of jealousy
and the heart ripping volcanic eruption of feeling i
knew not how to handle.
so. like the wooly mammoth and eohippus
i had to adapt
i had to change
put on an extra layer of fat, so to speak
to protect myself against the caustic environment i was
entering into.
unlike these extinct breeds, i have metamorphosized
but only to become a different type of creature in love
tougher
and through this evolution
the only thing i can say for myself
is that i have
survived.

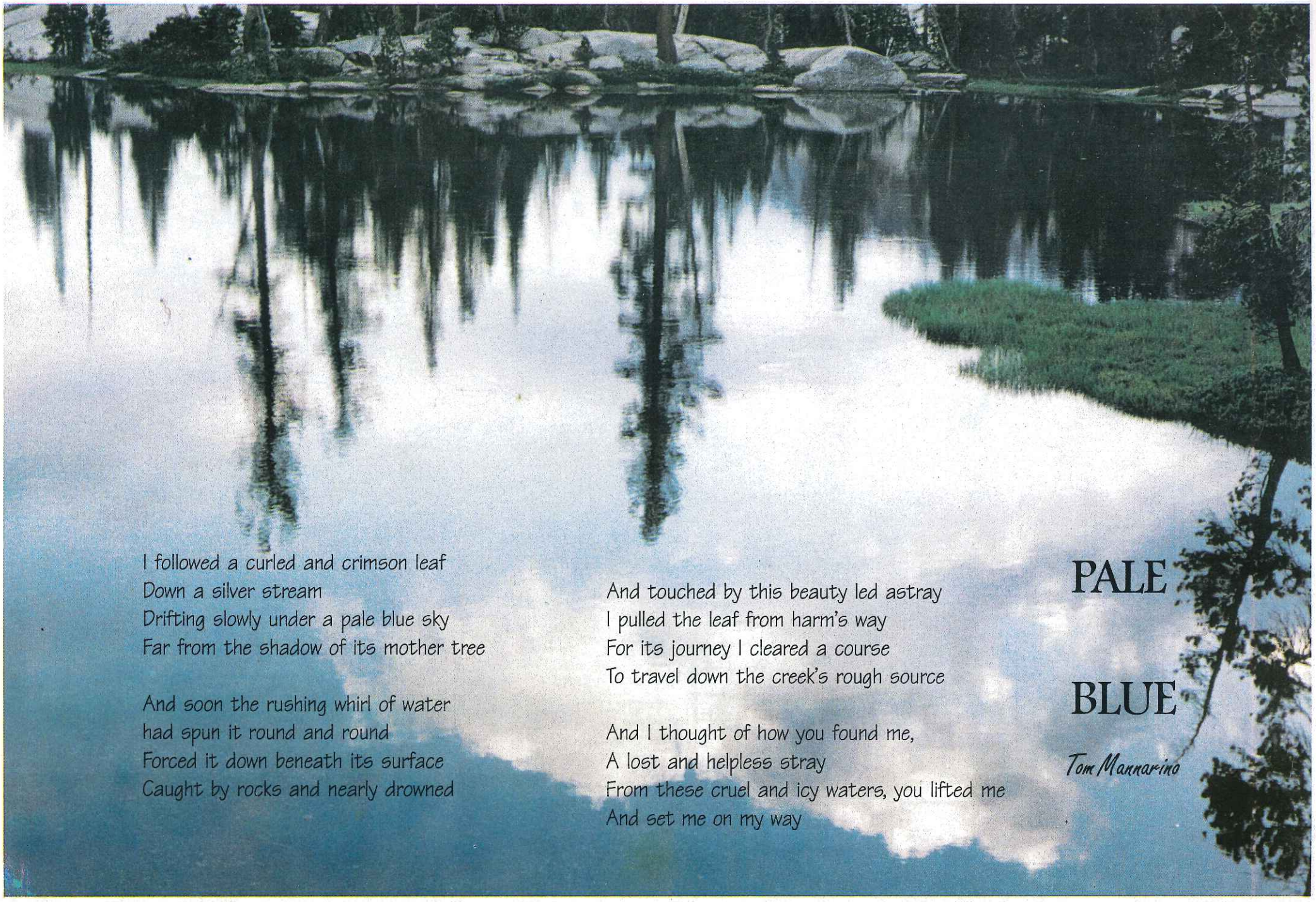
ellen j. davis



RAVEN

Black, opaque, against a pallet indigo
Outstretched dignity coasts on a february wind.
Does the flight of such a shaman speak to you?
He speaks to me:
"Respect the order of nature."
Not a feather lost to the common man.
No plummeting death due to human mediocrity.
Spirited belief in the sun, earth, and moon.
Thus a lonely flight in february,
onward and transcending onto the backdrop of mirabalis.

Gabriella Terwiliger



PALE BLUE

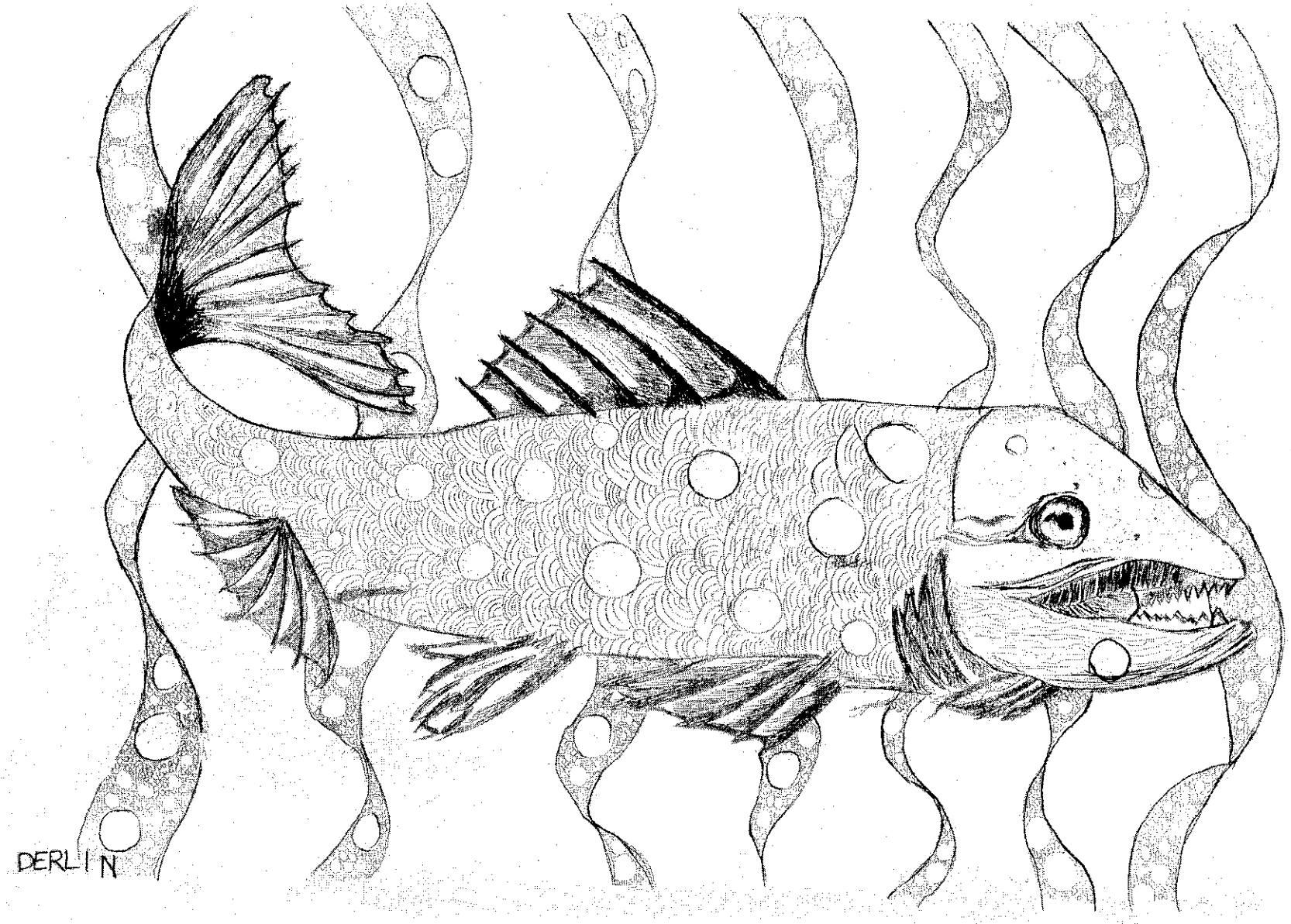
Tom Mannarino

I followed a curled and crimson leaf
Down a silver stream
Drifting slowly under a pale blue sky
Far from the shadow of its mother tree

And soon the rushing whirl of water
had spun it round and round
Forced it down beneath its surface
Caught by rocks and nearly drowned

And touched by this beauty led astray
I pulled the leaf from harm's way
For its journey I cleared a course
To travel down the creek's rough source

And I thought of how you found me,
A lost and helpless stray
From these cruel and icy waters, you lifted me
And set me on my way


DERLIN

A (watery) Little Death

My lover comes like a playful brook on a warm Spring day
Crystal clear tongues lick my toes as I take a cautious step in,
Lapping at my ankles, nipping at my knees —
Teasing, taunting, tasting, touching!
At last I venture deeper.

He coaxes gently, patiently, 'til the water swirls and swells around me.
Fluid hands caress, stroking breast and brow in silent adoration.
Surrender is sweet, and sweeter still as we are slowly swept away —
Desiring the deadly embrace of the waters beyond the bend.

The dam begins to crumble, the brook's playful pace to quicken
The roar grows ever louder, and certain death grows near —
We drift on waves of rapture, rushing ever toward the raging falls
Crashing, spinning, drowning, whirling!
We venture deeper still.

His body is liquid around me now, engulfing and sheltering at once.
The waters crash around, chests heaving in rhythm with the river —
I breathe him in and he fills my heart, my soul, my body and mind.
Time and space cease, we happily welcome death.

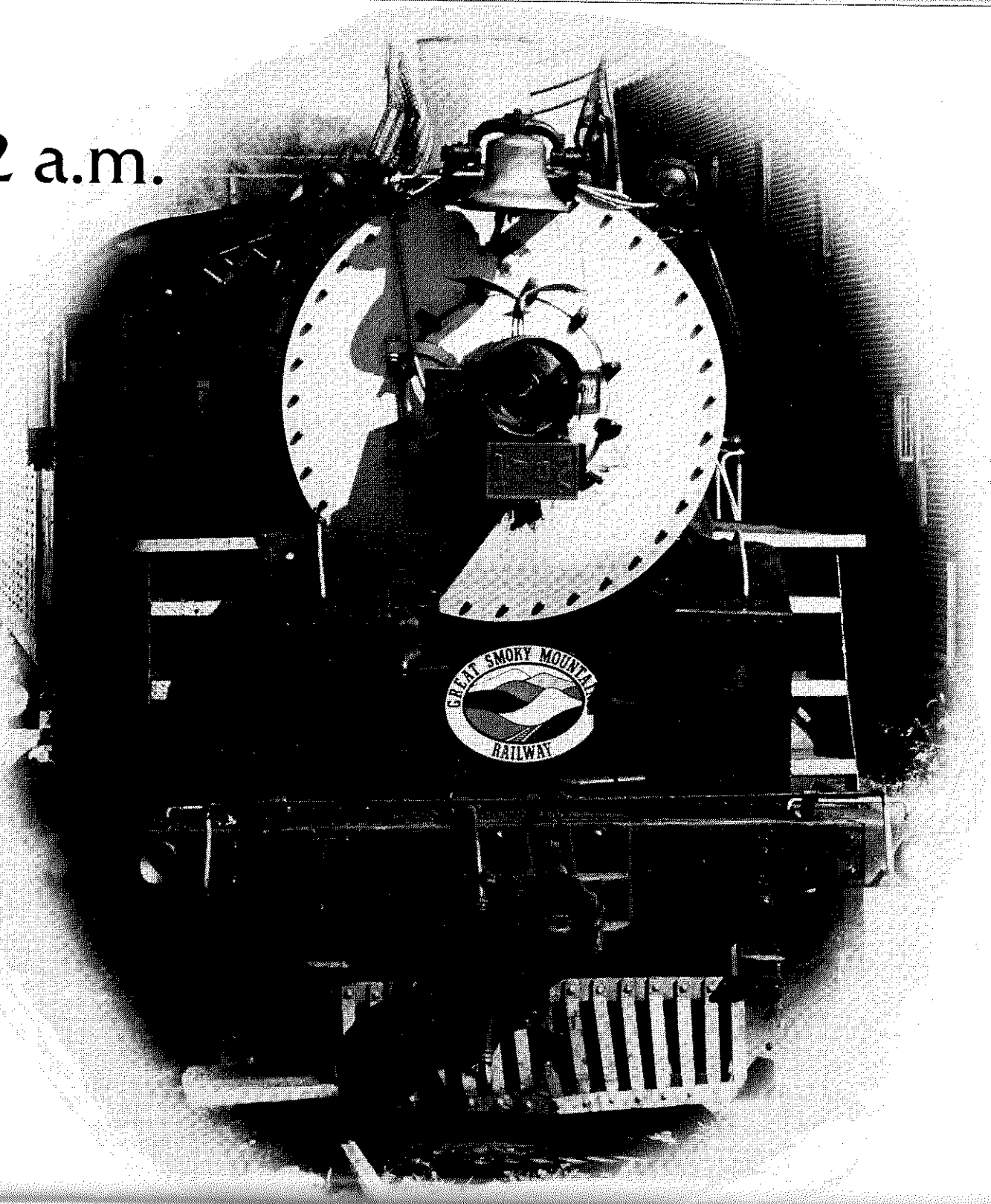
The dam is past collapsing, the cascade a warning calls —
Too late for retreat, when in surrender lies the sweetest victory.
We pause not an instant, then together plunge over the edge.
Falling, flying, sinking, soaring!
Into the depths we sail.

The water roars around us, rapture reaches out in tender caresses.
Our bodies quake to the thunderous hiss that deafens the ear
But heightens the senses beyond oblivion, or reason —
Wave after wave crashes down, until at last we float, sated by its fury.

Limp and languid, we drift silently back to still waters
As still as death, yet not the eternal death of mortal men
But the Little Death of the Immortal Bard
Laughing, loving, living, dying —
A death we will seek once more!

Shannon Emmel

Southbound - 2 a.m.

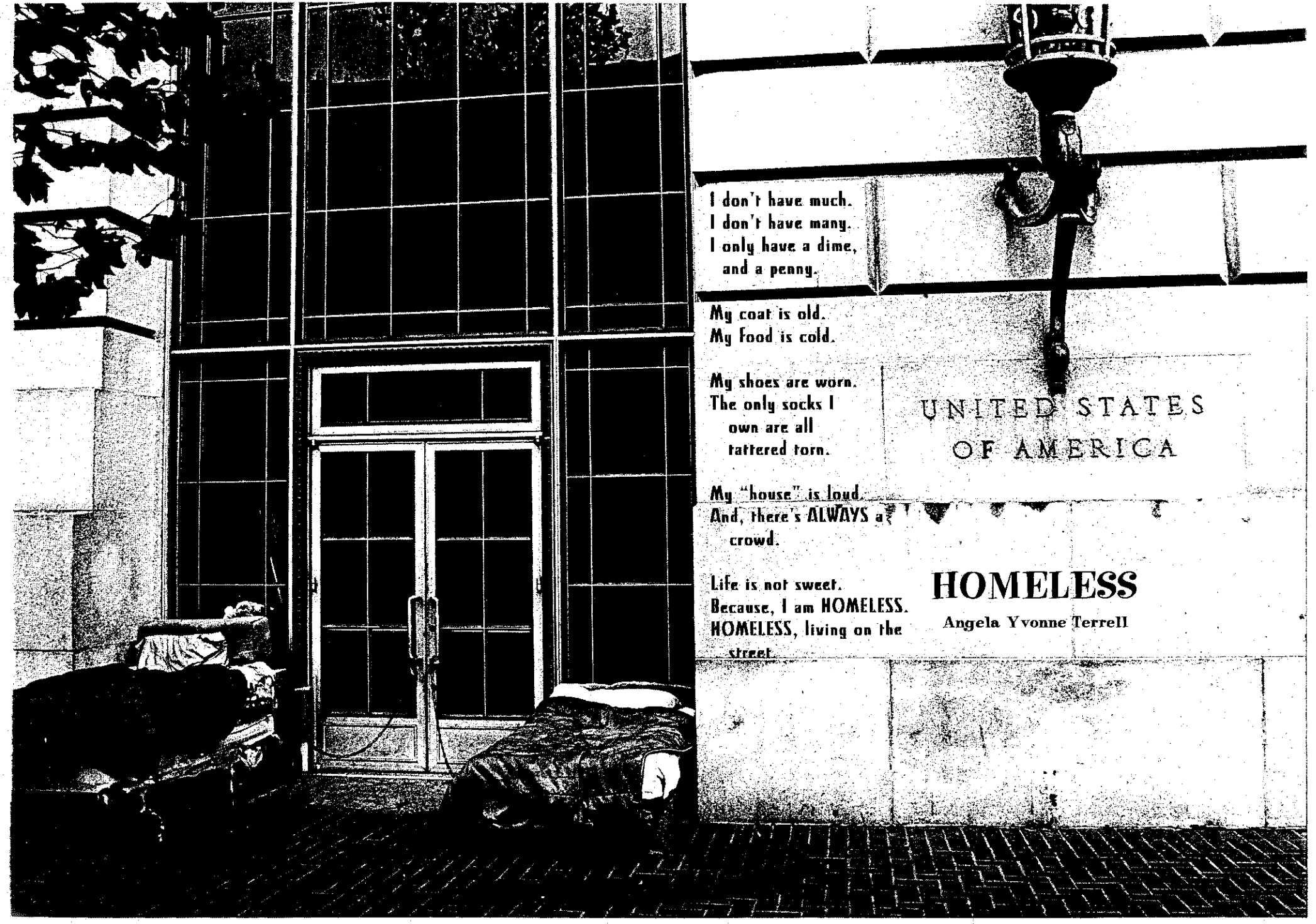


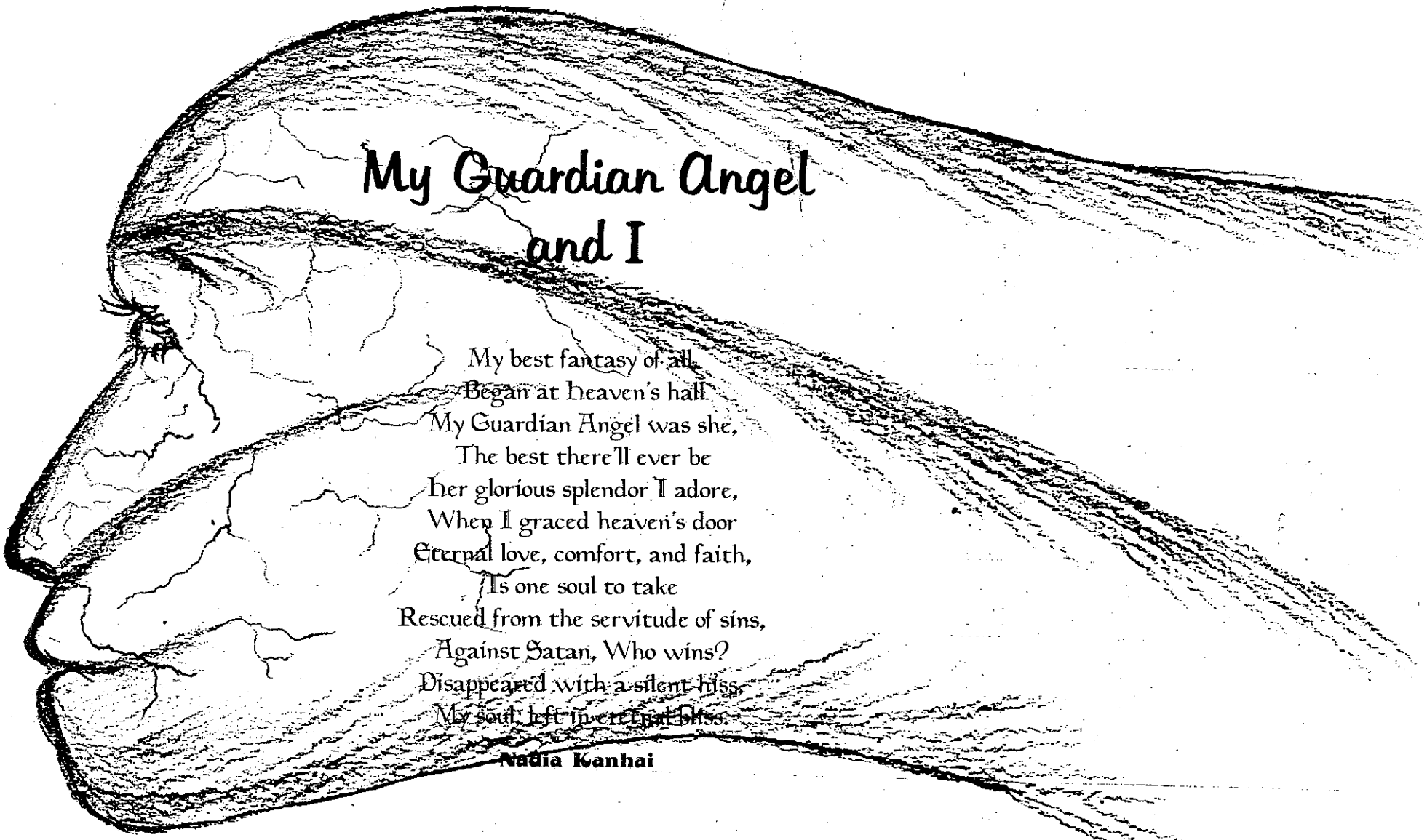
The rain has stopped.
Seeing myself
 ghosted over the peeled landscape.
Desolation clings to the barren cypress
 destroyed yet standing
Skeletal pillars of black ash
Assembled like charred fence posts
Along the highway.
Traffic passes
Tires sizzling on wet cement.
Strangers traveling alone
 like me
Even with you here.

Miles and miles of wasteland
Daylight brings empty faces,
Awakens empty lives.
The cardboard smile of billboards
Tell nothing of this reality.
On and on -
Forever forward

 yet going nowhere.
Your eyes reflect me like the window
You say nothing
Feel nothing.
Cold now
Like everything else.

M. Gabrill


I don't have much.
I don't have many.
I only have a dime,
and a penny.
My coat is old.
My food is cold.
My shoes are worn.
The only socks I
own are all
tattered torn.
My "house" is loud.
And, there's ALWAYS a
crowd.
Life is not sweet.
Because, I am HOMELESS.
HOMELESS, living on the
street
UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA
HOMELESS
Angela Yvonne Terrell



My Guardian Angel and I

My best fantasy of all
Began at heaven's hall
My Guardian Angel was she,
The best there'll ever be
Her glorious splendor I adore,
When I graced heaven's door
Eternal love, comfort, and faith,
Is one soul to take
Rescued from the servitude of sins,
Against Satan, Who wins?
Disappeared with a silent hiss,
My soul left in eternal bliss.

Nadia Kanhai

An abstract Sketch
Might gain some likeness

"Works of the un

01/11/95

Bike Ride Home

Ken Duncan

Patting of raindrops
Sounds faintly
Like crackling fire
On the asphalt.

A clean wet smell
That you can taste.

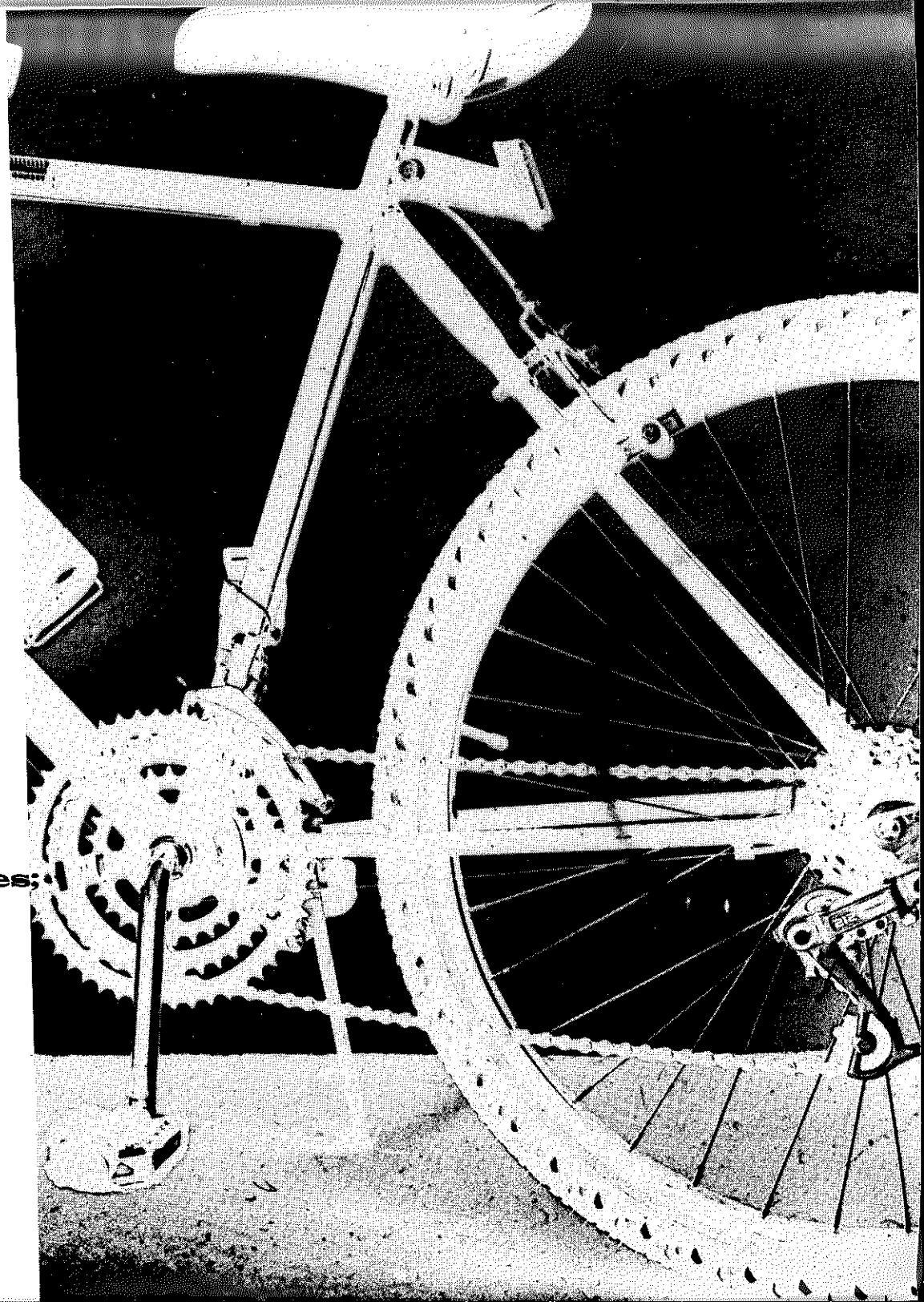
A silvery reflective gaze
Covers the world like frosting;
Throws back the headlights
Of hissing automobiles.

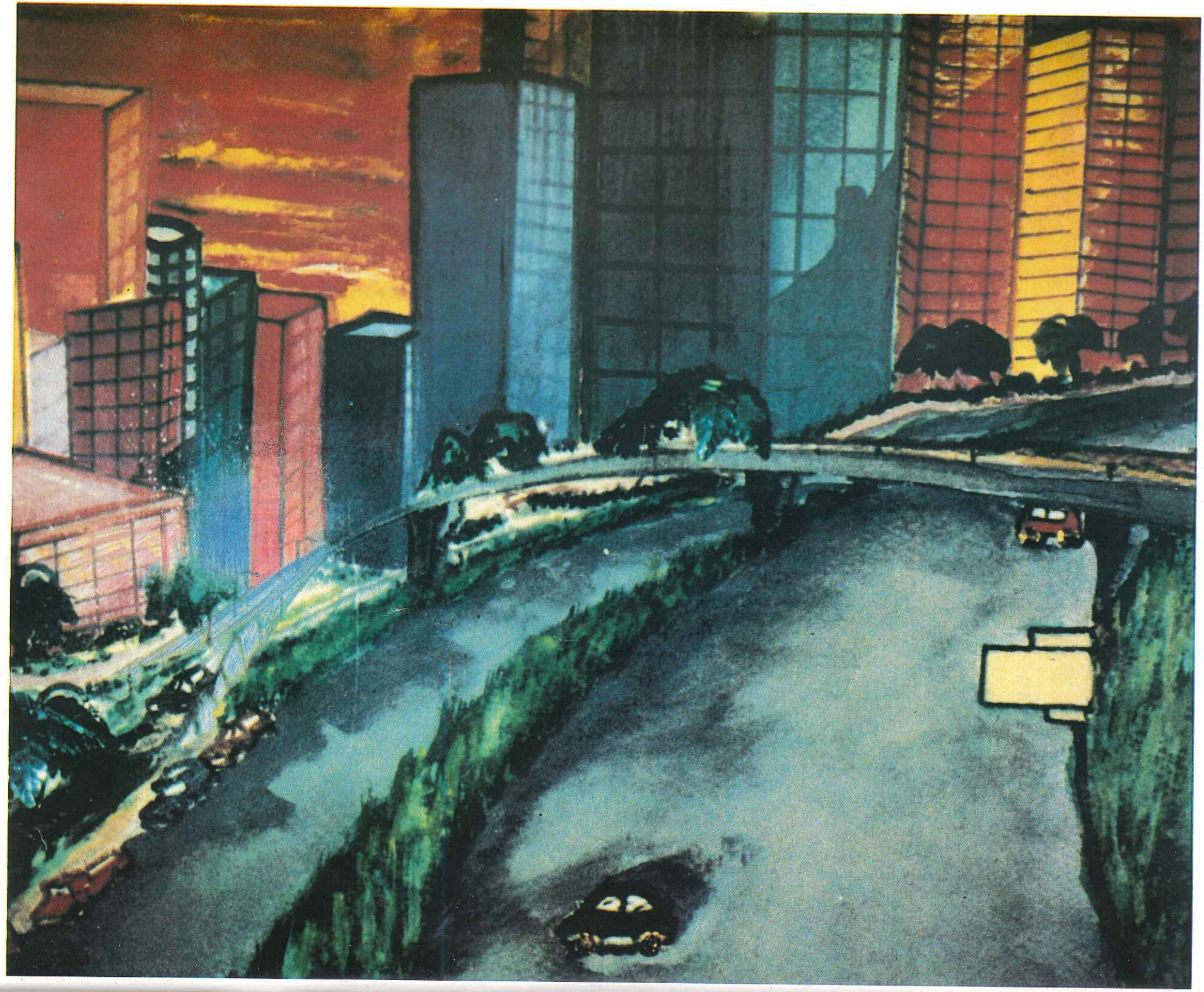
'Neath raincoat hood...
Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock
Pounds at my ear-drums...
Echoes the thunder
With some lightning of his own.

Guitar and lightning changing places;
The worlds of eyes and ears collide.

Kaleidescope images
Of wet wobbly drunkards
Stumbling through
Picasso rain.

And here go I,
Bicycling through
The mind of God;
An empty witness
Turning rubber wheels.





Night Streches Out

Night streches out like a tired, lazy cat
and the city awakes with a cacophony of groans.
Systematically, lights flood gaping mouths of open windows.

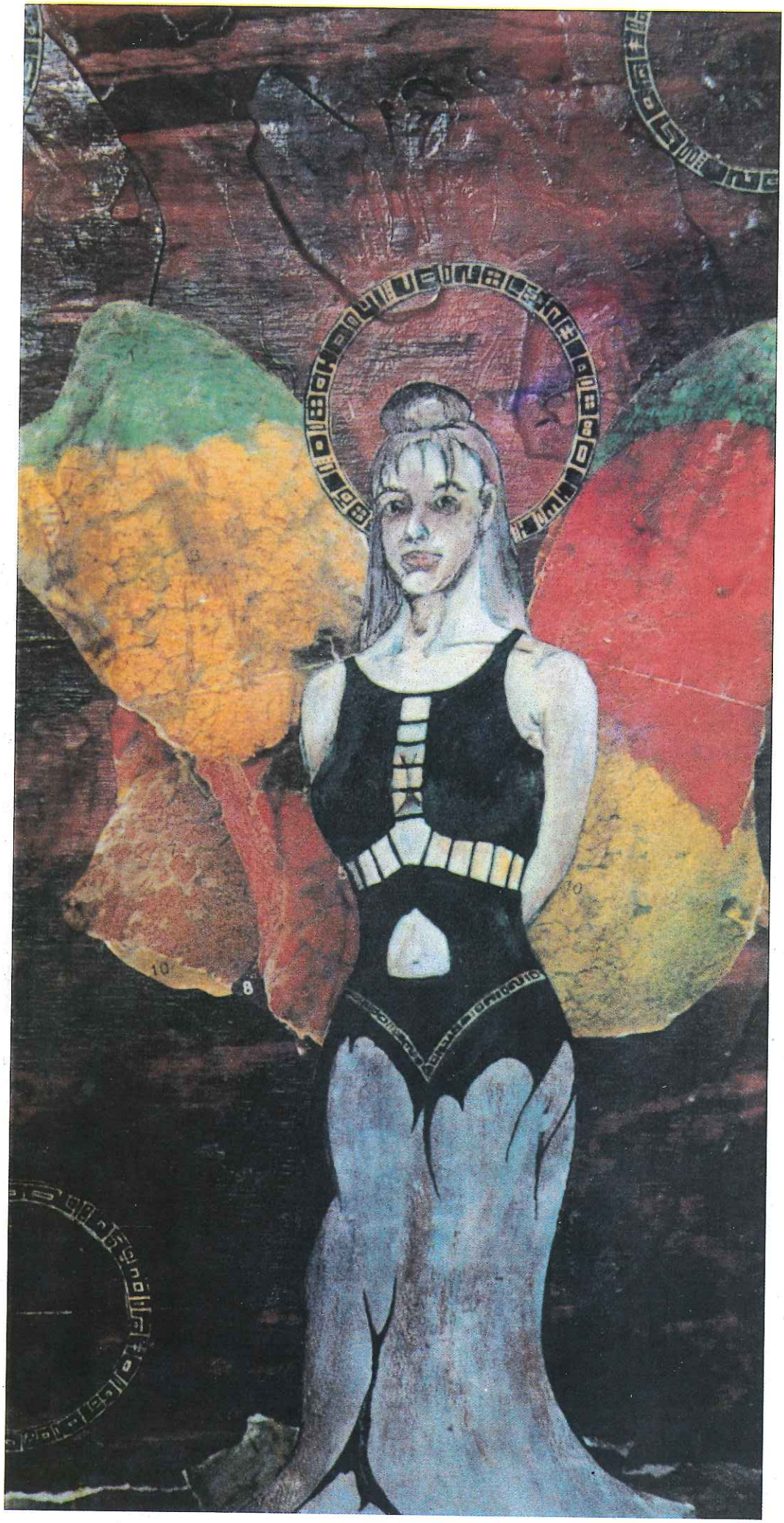
There is a tainted glow that lingers outside.
A neon sign sensuously hums,
casting hues of red against a dingy alley.
At ten it blinks.

Sidewalks hiss, steam rising,
antagonizing.
Longer shadows loom in doorways, but they are more dangerous.
They lurk.

Buildings shrinking into darkness,
masking their guilty faces.
Streets unravel a littered carpet of debris,
widening reluctantly as people pour onto them.

To the city, they are mere strangers it preys upon in the night.

Amanda Keimlyn Remmert



THE MUSHROOM

There in the midst of all Mother Nature's wondrous gifts — of creamy bulbs with red, furry heads; colossal trees with thick, sturdy branches adorned with spade-like leaves and full, ripe, purple fruit; midget shrubs, some bearing blue-pearled berries and others decorated with gold, fingery pods — stands a single mushroom, a fleshy, white disc as luscious as young, untainted skin, growing on a rotting log.

Dragonflies, unlike butterflies who fly with the innocence and breath of the wind or wasps who dart menacingly in the air, are frivolous in their flight. They rush from flower to flower stopping at each one abruptly. Then, for a moment, they admire its virginal beauty, and, like an adulterous man, they fly off in pursuit of another flower. So, too, the dragonflies visit the mushroom.

With latticed amber and onyx wings of unrestrained anticipation, the dragonflies come in their groups to acknowledge this fair lady seated amidst the royal forest carpet of rich, verdant raiment. They hover above her in admiration of her looming womanhood.

Despite the sweet hums of praise falling from the tilting mouths of the dragonflies, the mushroom stands morbid and morose for she can hear things unheard to the rest of the forest. It is the sound of Death's scythe cutting the wind. . .

Anger is a strange poison that intoxicates the soul, mind and body. The mushroom, because of her frail nature, loses her beauty quickly after the zenith of her youth. Her once firm, milky, unbruised body sinks uncontrollably into senescence. The uterine soil beckons her back to her birthplace. The inevitable return to the womb of the earth looms before her like the silver-stringed death-trap of the widowed spider.

The mushroom has been deprived of loveliness. Her grace has been taken away much too soon. So vengeance flows throughout her being. In her tissues, in her cells flows the longing for retribution. Her silent anger has made her body lethal and poisonously tainted. But all this she hides like a child who has done wrong. The decay begins. Brown spore-like spots appear on her delicate cap. With each passing second she can feel her firm, turgid body becoming flaccid. The dragonflies still hover around her, but once they see the growing blotches on her skin, they flit away carelessly to find another voluptuous coquette.

Ants with beaded bodies gather at her stalk. They see her slowly withering. She is still attractive despite the mottled chestnut blotches.

Tiny footsteps approach. The ants scurry to their nest briskly. A lovely little pixie with ears as pointed as leaves and short, honey-brown hair approaches the dying mushroom. She kneels beside the mushroom and looks at it with intense curiosity. The pixie reaches out to touch the mushroom with her delicate, lily-white hand.

"How lovely you are," says the pixie to the mushroom, "except for those curious, brown specks. Oh, I am so terribly hungry. I am afraid I shall never be home in time for supper. Little miss Mushroom, you do look so delicious and I am so horribly famished, I hope you don't mind if I eat you."

The pixie plucks the mushroom off the rotting log. A milky fluid trickles from the mushroom stalk. The pixie holds the mushroom in her hands, the way that children at First Communion are taught to hold their hands to receive the body of Christ.

"Bless the food I eat today, God. Amen."

She looks pitifully at the mushroom.

"I take only what I need for survival, not for greed."

Without another word she bites into the mushroom. The mushroom is bitter. The pixie swallows. She takes another bite. The milky fluid coats the pixie's tongue. Retribution is acrid. The mushroom is dead. The pixie hears the cutting of the wind. With startled eyes and a ghastly demeanor she realizes her mistake. The womb of the earth is calling . . .

Glenda Leung